



“NOT FOR ME PERSONALLY, BUT...”

Players’ reactions and thoughts on attempt at inclusiveness in game design

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<p>Tiivistelmä/Referat – Abstract</p> <p>Different studies have assessed, in the past, the potential effects of showcasing inclusiveness of different identities in popular media. Those research often about TV series and movies, have shown the media’s potential to “participate in the construction of the imagined community, the nation, and the membership of that nation” (Nikunen, 2013, p. 307). However, too few of those studies concern video games, even though the relevance of researching that form of media is growing incessantly along with its popularity. The recent events of Gamergate and other criticism in the last years also highlighted that need.</p> <p>In the last years, some members of the gaming industries, touched by the awareness-raising campaigns on the potential effects of representation – or lack thereof – in video games, have attempted to improve the inclusiveness in their designs. That is the case of the Blizzard team creating the first person shooter Overwatch. Jeff Kaplan, Overwatch’s game director, has been explicit about the developers intend to send a message of “inclusiveness and open mindedness” through their game design (Kaplan, 2017), which is why the game was selected for the present research.</p> <p>This thesis includes theory drawn from social sciences concerning representation, visuality, and media effect. As the subject of analysis is a video game, a part of the theory comes also from the field of game research: game analysis essentials, and the notion of the transformativity of games. This basis allows a short analysis of the game Overwatch in order to evaluate partially the inclusiveness and the type of representation observable in the game.</p> <p>How are players reflecting on and reacting to developers’ attempt at inclusive design in the video game Overwatch? To answer the question, in-depth interviews were led with active players of the game. The participants told their first reactions to the game, then expressed their thoughts about the game’s level of inclusiveness, the necessity of that inclusiveness, and the potential effects it could have on themselves or other players. Their answers were compiled and analysed.</p> <p>Although the scope of this work doesn’t allow definite conclusions, it has been found that the interviews are welcoming the inclusiveness in the game Overwatch. Some of them were even to see more diverse representation added to it in the future. Most of the players are however making the distinction between Overwatch and other genre of games, saying that such inclusiveness should not be required from the developers, but encouraged; the participants give value to the developers’ creative freedom and don’t want to see it hindered by pressure from critics.</p> <p>Regarding the potential effects of the game’s values on the players, the participants were mostly unsure about the possibility at first. Yet, towards the end of the interview, as they became more comfortable, some of them shared personal experiences of media effect from Overwatch. Those testimonies were especially interesting as they are comparable to Bandura’s social cognitive theory, which is discussed in the thesis (Bandura, 1977; Kirsch, 2010). The results of this study invite interested researchers to investigate further in that direction.</p>		
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Media & Diversity

In the last years, I studied a lot the subject of media and diversity, as in the representation of minorities in media and the effect it can have on viewers. The subject was incredibly interesting, although it seemed difficult to study for methodological reasons.

The first article that gained my attention regarding media effect studies was an article by Kaarina Nikunen titled *Difference in Reality: Ethnic Minorities and the Boundaries of the Nation in Reality TV in Finland* (2013). Nikunen's research topic was how TV programs participate in building the image of the community, the nation and membership of that nation for the viewers. The TV programs in the study were featuring immigrants in the hope of including them in the broadcasted representation of the Finnish nation and Nikunen attempted to assess the reactions of the viewers (Nikunen, 2013).

However, as numerous studies on media effect, Nikunen was researching TV programs. While it is an interesting and relevant subject of study, I observed it as a tendency among media effect studies in general: most of the researches seemed to be interested in TV programs or cinema. However, while those are indeed very popular entertainment medias, they don't have the monopoly of the consumers' attention nowadays. Since some years ago, another media form made its entrance in people's homes and has been increasingly popular ever since: digital games.

## 1.2 The relevance of studying games

Ever since digital games were introduced to household, it has been a "casual revolution." (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2013, p. 171) According to the Entertainment Software Association, 64% of American households own device used for video gaming purposes and 60% of Americans play video games daily. Games are increasingly popular among all groups in the population, giving a hard time to the stereotype of gamers being young men and male teenagers. Nowadays, the average gamer is 34 years old. Only about 15% of them are under 18 years old and some 11% are over 50 years old. Also, almost half of American gamers, 45%, are women (Entertainment Software Association, 2018).

Video games deserve more than ever to be studied as are TV programs and movies. As explained by Flanagan and Nissenbaum in their book *Values at Play in Digital Games*, like other media works, “All games express and embody human values.” (2014, p. 3). Whether it is intended or not, they will reflect the values and beliefs of the group of people who created them, and therefore communicating some of their values to the players (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014, p. 3).

In their book, Flanagan and Nissenbaum identify clearly three reasons for which it is important to study values in games in this time and age. The first one is that it enriches our understanding of how important some sociocultural patterns in the norms of participation are, play and communication. The second is that digital media are growing, and so do the opportunities, but also responsibilities, for the community to reflect on the values carried in games. The last one is that games have actually surpassed in popularity film and television and will consequently be shaping a lot in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: work, learning, health care, etc. They are already shaping important parts of the popular culture, especially online (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014, p. 3).

### 1.3 Overwatch

For all those reasons, it is important to study media effects coming from games. Like the TV programs studied by Nikunen and others, video games carry values through the representation they have of different people and identities. Some games makers are, for instance, attempting to share positive values with their thoughtful designs.

That is the case of the game of study for this thesis, Overwatch. When the game was launched, in 2016, players noticed that the characters were representing different cultures and ethnic groups all working together towards a common goal. Overwatch’s game director, Jeff Kaplan, explained in the 2017 D.I.C.E. Summit that it was indeed intentional from the developer team, that they wanted their designs to send a message of open mindedness and inclusivity.” (Kaplan, 2017) This particular aspect of the game made is why Overwatch and its players will be the particular objects of this study.

## 1.4 The thesis

This study was intended to study if the inclusiveness intend in Overwatch has had any impact on its players. In-depth interviews were led with Overwatch players, asking them to express their thoughts about the game's level of inclusiveness and what kind of consequences they have witnessed or imagined on the players. The research question is: How are players reflecting on and reacting to developers' attempt at inclusive design of the video game Overwatch? The interview questions were attempting to discover the interviewees' opinions on the different aspects of inclusiveness and make them tell more about potential effect it could have on the players. The design of the game is also partially analyzed in order to assess the different forms of representation included in the game.

In this thesis, the research done during the past year will be presented as follows: first, the theoretical background used will be introduced. As this is a work done in a social science setting, along with the literature review, the theoretical background will include an introduction to game studies in order to ensure the reader's understanding of the concept used from that field. Second, the theoretical background will be followed by a presentation of the game Overwatch, including a short analysis of some of its most relevant aspects for this research. Third, the methodology of research will be explained. Fourth, the analysis of the results will be presented, followed finally by the discussion putting in relation the found results with the theory previously presented. The conclusion will be included in that chapter.

## 2 THEORITICAL BACKGROUND

In this chapter will be introduced the different theories and previous data that were used to build the methodology of this study, and to analyse its results. It includes an introduction to the field of game studies, some media effect theories, an attempt to define what is representation, and finally background information about the history of representation in the type of game analysed here.

### 2.1 Introduction to Game Studies

Games studies, as Frans Mäyrä (2008) presents them, are a relatively new academic field focusing on games, playing and related phenomena, like the recent rise of the digital popular culture. It is however not restricted to the study of digital media and considers games made of any technology or medium as a subject of study. So far, several different approaches from other academic disciplines have contributed to the field, including sociology, psychology, computer sciences, educational studies, literature and art studies, to name a few (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 11).

Those different points of view are contributing to build the field and enrich it. As other scholars put it, this process is making games studies a “cross-sectional and interdisciplinary space”, a “melting pot of experimentation and development by scholars” (Fewster & Grufstedt, 2016, p. 1). In this context, it certainly doesn’t seem out of place to study the media from the point of view of social sciences.

Games are differentiating themselves from other media by the fact that they are interactive. In fact, for study purposes, game scholars often divide them in two elementary layers: the core and the shell. The core is the gameplay, the game’s mechanics, the rules: what does the player have to do to win the game? How is the game reacting to different commands? Is it a competitive game, a cooperative one, a puzzle, racing, or shooting game? The shell is made of the other elements around those mechanics, like the interface, the story, the graphics, the music, etc. The two part are very different from each other, but together they form the key structure of a game (Mäyrä, 2008, pp. 16-17).

When analysing the values carried by a video game, it can be done by taking its shell and analysing it as one would analyse other media like cinema or literature (Fewster, 2018). It is also possible to

analyse what message is delivered by the mechanics of the game, the core. When the mechanics and the story match each other, a multimodal analysis is possible; when they don't, a ludo-narrative dissonance is observed and conflicting values or messages are received by the player (Dunne, 2014).

Another aspect of games that can be a study subject is the game culture surrounding them, or even the subcultures surrounding different games. Subcultures are defined by Mäyrä (2008, p. 16) as “groups of people who have common practices, values and interests in common and who form through their interaction a distinct group within a larger culture.” Group members will even share a common language and/or terminology, rituals, and interest in similar artefacts. Those subcultures can form around game, as around other media, in fan groups or discussion forums, and also within the game world. Becoming part of subculture can be compared to a cultural experience in a foreign country, in the sense that it can prove as transformative to those who experience it. Subcultures surrounding games can be considered as such and therefore become the subject of ethnological studies.

When it comes to the way games should be studied, there are two schools of thoughts. First, the formalists, who preconize an analysis of the game itself, a study on the nature or use of the work. Within that category are two sub-groups: the narratologists, for whom the narrative, the shell, is more important, and then there are their counterpart, the ludologists, for whom the narrative is a mere trapping and who think that games should be studied as a set of rules. The second school of thought is the one of situationism, which preconizes an analysis of game through their players and as being part of the culture at large (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2013, p. 11).

Social scientists have the tools to be able to analyse a game's text as well as its players and surrounding culture (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2013, p. 9), which is what will occur in this study. However, some games mechanics are also part of the narrative; they contribute to build it and show the values carried by the game. They are also part of the narrative: for example, they can be used to show personality traits in characters (Chu, 2017). Even if it can be divided in parts, a game is still a unified whole, especially when there is only a limited ludo-narrative dissonance. Therefore, some mechanics will be mentioned when they are important to the analysis. Mostly, this research will study the game from a situationist point of view, considering the value intend of the designers

and observing how it plays in the current cultural environment. The game will be considered as a whole, without expending on the mechanics more than the presented theory allows it.

## 2.2 The Impact of Media

As already shortly discussed in the introduction, media can have an impact on their viewers by the values they carry and the way they depict the nation they are produced for (Nikunen, 2013).

In Nikunen's research, the studied media was made by producers who wanted to include immigrants in the casting in order to expand the idea of their own country, Finland, as multicultural. It can be said that visibility in national media like reality TV can help minorities by including them in the national culture, which is important (Nikunen, 2013).

However, media don't have instant, magical effects on their viewers: the reactions can vary depending of the message, the way it is delivered, and the way it is received. For instance, Nikunen observed that some viewers who noticed that their media was advocating for inclusion of immigrants had actually a reaction completely opposite to the desired one: backlash, anger and polarisation (Nikunen, 2013).

Media are not all-powerful tools that can completely alter one's thoughts magically. However, they do have a certain influence. It is a subject that has been theorised extensively. In this section will be introduced some relevant media effect theories.

### 2.2.1 The perceived power of media

As Steven Kirsh, author of *Media and youth: a developmental perspective* (2010) explains it: "For millennia, media has been thought to influence those who consume it, and more often than not, the effects were thought to be negative." (Kirsh, 2010, p. 1)

Indeed, from the ancient Greece, where it was feared that spoken words could corrupt the youth, the influence of media has always been source of worries; especially new media, and especially on vulnerable, impressionable youth. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Church deemed written words as the bastion of evil; in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, scholars thought that novels and newspapers could undermine the mental health by overexciting their nervous system; in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, movies



were thought to teach depravity and immorality; radio, when it became popular, was perceived as a threat for youth's morals; in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century started the moral panic surrounding video games. New media, same fears: for years, video games were accused of harming mental health, especially of youth. Recently, in the last decade, Internet and social media have attracted more attention as a potential threat to mental health (Kirsh, 2010, pp. 2-3).

The point is that media effect has always been exaggerated and feared. Those perceived threats on were historically mostly based on anecdotal "evidences" and conjecture. However, the fact is that a media is a communication tool, like any other tool, media are neither intrinsically good, nor bad. It is all depending on the way the media is used (Kirsh, 2010, pp. 2-3)..

By itself, a media has a limited moral value: it is its content, the messages carried that can have, or not, effects on those who consume the media. If the carried content can have negative effects, it also has the potential to have positive ones. Nowadays, there is empirical evidence supporting the claims that media have an influence on consumers. However, whether it is a good or bad one is mostly in the eye of the beholder (Kirsh, 2010, pp. 2-4).

## 2.2.2 Introduction to media effect theories

Through time, several media effect theories have been developed. Some are awfully simplistic, like the magic bullet theory, which stipulates that media creates instantly a uniformity in thought and action in those it touches. This is no longer a valid theory, as it is known today that media do not influence everyone in the same way (Kirsh, 2010, p. 27). More recent and relevant theories are trying to account for different factors that may affect the sort of influence media have.

### 2.2.2.1 *Cultivation theory*

The cultivation theory is built on television research and attempts to explain how media can create or perpetuate stereotypes. According to cultivation theory, it is the repetitive exposure to a media that will affect the viewers, causing their thoughts and behaviours to become progressively similar to those presented in the media (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2013, p. 160). Research using this theory is mostly focusing on studying enduring, repetitive exposure to television during a long period of the viewer's life (Gerbner, et al., 1986, p. 38).

Since it was first shared, two factors have been added to the theory, explaining further the process: first, mainstreaming, explaining how seeing repetitively something in media can make it something expected to happen. For example, it would explain why it has been observed that heavy TV viewers in America have a greater tendency to expect being victim of a personal crime, no matter in which neighbourhood they live (Gerbner, et al., 1986). Another factor is resonance: when a real-life experience resembling what is seen in media occurs, it would amplify greatly the cultivation effect (Kirsh, 2010, pp. 28-30).

#### *2.2.2.2 Social cognitive theory*

The social cognitive theory was built by Albert Bandura as an expansion of his own work, the social learning theory. According to Kirsh, the social learning theory is one of the most cited media affect theories in the modern era. It stipulates that children and adolescents learn by observing behaviour of others and the consequences of those behaviours. This means that the behaviours that are encouraged, glamorized or glorified are more likely to be imitated than those that result in undesirable consequences (Kirsh, 2010, pp. 31-33).

By writing the social cognitive theory, Bandura goes further, intending to show that whether a seen behaviour is adopted or not is more of a choice, and not only a simple response to the environment. He adds that there are three factors that will determine if an individual will choose or not to imitate a behaviour: behavioural, which is the influence of previously acquired behaviours; personal, influence from the individual's expectations, beliefs, and self-perception; and environmental, influence from surrounding friends, family members and media. In Bandura's theory, the influence of outside factors on one's behaviour is considered bi-directional (Kirsh, 2010, pp. 32-34).

The individual is also considered to have agency over what surrounds them: if one wants to change their own behaviour, they are likely to create themselves environmental conditions to do so (Bandura, 1977, pp. 9-10). Therefore, "Both people and environment are reciprocal determinants to each other" (Bandura, 1977, p. vii).

#### *2.2.3 Transformativity of games*

Since digital games first appeared, there was people who would fear their effects. Ronald Reagan even claimed wanting to use video games to create a generation of "highly skilled cold war

warriors”. In the same time period, some doctors were already proclaiming games as being one of the top health risks for the population (Squire, 2002).

People feared that games, which were perceived as having exclusively violent themes, would make people violent in the real world. At the beginning of this century, there were lots of speculation regarding how games would be the cause of violence like school shootings. Yet, at the same time, some studies also showed that games could also be positive: for example, that giving an Atari console to a household would increase their family time (Squire, 2002).

“The history of cultural media shows an almost instinctive skepticism leveled at new media. It has been true of radio, it has been true of movies, and it has certainly been true of television” (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2013, p. 157). Games have been even more scrutinized and demonized than Hollywood movies or television. Furthermore, the people condemning often don’t have much play experience (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014, p. xi).

According to Flanagan and Nissenbaum, the authors of *Values at Play in Digital Games* (2014), it has become difficult to discuss of the topic of values in video games with game makers. Most of them have had enough of it and refuse to take anymore part in the discussion (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014, p. xii).

However, it is a necessary discussion. Games are made to entertain, yes, but they are also a mean of expression, even an underrated art form (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2013, pp. 158-159). As a part of pop culture, they will have a societal output in the context in which they are played and those potential effects should be considered in design decisions (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014).

As media works, games have also the potential to influence their users through the same mechanisms as described sooner in the media effect theories. Although there is not much research done on cultivation theory applied to games, it is something that is considered nowadays since games have been part of the popular culture for some years now, and some players have been surrounded by them for as long. Games display behaviours that players can decide to learn as explained in the social learning theory. They can be an influence causing a person to want to change a behaviour, or helping them do so, even more so since they can teach and train the player interactively.

As mentioned earlier, games differentiate themselves from other media forms by their interactive quality. In games, players take decisions that will lead to different outcomes. Games have the capacity to make the players reflect on their actions by making them experience the consequences of their acts. As moral objects, games can be powerful learning tools (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2013, p. 161).

Games can procure a learning experience also by the community of culture within the games or around them. Players are often very interested and discuss the games with other players, engaging that way in a learning process. Immersion in games or in their culture can act as a travel in an imagined community, which can also be transformative for the players (Fewster & Grufstedt, 2016, pp. 2-3).

Many games have an educational impact, even when they don't intend to have one. Games reflect the context in which they were made and consequently all have some relation to the real world's current topics, values, morals, politics, etc. (Fewster, 2018) With their current level of popularity, games have the potential to not only reflect, but also determine how the members of their culture understand their past and their present (Chapman, et al., 2017, p. 360).

Most importantly for this study, "Every game expresses a set of values" and the "player perceptions also contribute to a game's value" (Flanagan & Nissembaum, 2014, p. 15). This means that players with different values and life experiences will interpret a same game in a different way.

*"Games embody beliefs from a time and space, provide a sample of what is important to a particular group of makers and players, and offer us a way to understand what ideas and meanings are valuable. [...] The many interrelated elements or dimensions of a game – narrative, interface, interactions, mechanics, and more – contribute to a coherent play experience. Any of these elements can have cultural, ethical, an political significance, even when they appear to be value-neutral" (Flanagan & Nissembaum, 2014, p. 33).*

This is important because this is often what people fear, when thinking of media effect: that the media will corrupt the users' values in some way, teaching them new values according to some

agenda served by the creators. It is also what will be addressed here, the question of if a certain game actually conveys the intended values to its players.

### 2.3 Representation

In this research, it will be considered that representation happens when someone, here a player, sees traits they consider part of their own identity in a media, here in games, and consider that the existence of the group they are part of is therefore acknowledged (Passmore & Mandryk, 2018, p. 369).

Representation in that way is often talked about from the angle of ethnic and physical representation, especially with skin colour: the players feel represented or acknowledged if they see a character with the same skin colour as themselves. It can also include other physical traits that differentiate different ethnicities: hair colour, hair texture, eye colour, facial traits, etc. (Passmore & Mandryk, 2018)

According to Passmore et al. (2018), studies trying to find out if people desire more representation in media have led to mixed results, mostly underreporting desire for better representation. The reason for that is a difficulty to overcome the participants' learned neutrality. People would have learned that the right answer to a question about representation was to answer that anything is fine and that they don't mind, no matter their identity. It could be called an acceptance to subscribe to the norm, which was, for a long time, in video games, White heterosexual cis-gender able-bodied male characters. However, it appears that more recent reports by studies succeeding to overcome that obstacle showed that people actually have a desire for better representation of different ethnicities in video game characters (Passmore, et al., 2018).

Still according to Passmore et al.'s paper, Black groupings were those expressing the greatest needs for more representation in video games, most likely because they are also often the ones with the fewer options. For instance, they would like that the different settings available for characters would not be only in the skin tone, which can lead for uncanny Black-face looking representation. There was mention of needing to see also differences in facial features like the mouth, the nose, and in hair styles and textures. White groupings were the ones who seemed to

have the most widely learned to not care about the representation and saying that it was not important to them (Passmore & Mandryk, 2018, p. 371).

Nonetheless, there is a need to allow people to feel represented in video games. Also, character customization should allow self-representation, which means playing with a character that is part of a group to which you identify, and is what most people want in video games, and also enhanced self-representation, which is when a player is playing as an ideal version of themselves (Passmore & Mandryk, 2018, p. 369).

However, it is not only the ethnicity that is part of a person's identity. According to Hall (1997(2)), the other facets of an individual identity include most often their gender, cultural background, sexual orientation, age, and profession. More aspects can also be included like the height, the body type, or other particular groups to which they identify. They are all aspects of representation that should eventually be more observed.

### 2.3.1 Political representation

The current debate about political representation is somewhat similar to which addressed previously about representation in video games and consequently deserves a parenthesis in this section, since this study is made from a social sciences point of view. Both issues are mostly concerned about ethnic representation and ask if there is a need of more representation of minorities. In the case of political representation, the exact question is: do people part of visible minorities feel the need to be represented by politicians that are also part of the same minority group?

In representative politics, the differences between the represented people and the one representing them is something difficult to avoid completely (Stocchetti, 2017, p. 40).

In practice, it has proven difficult to find out if minorities would vote more for a candidate representing them, because too often, there are few minority members actually getting to the point of having a candidate position within the parties. Also, the minority turn down in elections is often low (Bird, et al., 2011, pp. 272-273).

There is no saying, here, that politicians from the majority group cannot represent the interests of the minorities. However, it has been noted that politicians from minority groups have a greater tendency to take care of matters and take part in projects and committees related to minority rights (Bird, et al., 2011, p. 273).

Put in parallel with the problem of representation in video games, the two become very interesting to compare. Is it difficult to survey minorities about it because they learned to answer that it doesn't matter? Would they feel more included and vote in greater number if they felt more represented in the choice of candidates? Are voters like players? Because some of them certainly are player. The comparison illustrates how the issue at hand in this research is wider than it may seem at first.

### 2.3.2 Signifiers and stereotypes

Differences are everywhere, characterizing every element of the world. They are essential in some ways to understand the world and give meaning to things. According to Hall (2003, p. 235), this fact cannot be ignored. When building meaning, things are defined and characterised by comparing them to what they are not; people are identifying themselves by comparing themselves to others. Difference is ambivalent and can be seen both as positive and negative. Everyone is someone's 'other': consequently, everyone is, at once, defining themselves and being defined by others (Hall, 2003, p. 236). Although, in situation of cultural hegemony, meaning is constructed mainly by the dominant culture and compared to it.

Still, breaking up society into distinct types based on specific characteristics, physical or intellectual, is a very normal and profound cultural impulse. Cultures use differences to classify, differentiate and mostly understand the world and their relation to it. It keeps things in order and easy to grasp; it helps knowing one's own place compared to others. However, classification becomes a problem when a culture imposes their classification system, which becomes the way of disposition of power, and also when there are some things appearing that don't belong in any of the pre-set categories. When classification becomes a way to maintain a power system in order, it is disturbing when anything comes and breaks the classification (Hall, 1997(1)).

Stereotypes come from the classification systems. Basically, they reduce a person to a trait they have, simplifying them (Hall, 1997(2), p. 257). Seeing someone through a stereotype means

noticing that they belong to a certain category in the classification system, and therefore associating to them other traits that are considered to come with the first one in a sort of “package deal”.

Hall notes five traits with which humans identify themselves generally, and to which stereotypes are culturally attached usually: gender, age, class, race, and sexuality (Hall, 1997(1)). Race and gender, as they are more discussed by him, will be explored further here.

### 2.3.2.1 Race as a signifier

Because of the classification systems, when one says “Black”, a cluster of other characteristics will be signified by that word. Hall names as examples: athletic, dances well, barbaric behaviour, low intelligence, and more (Hall, 1997(1)). Those characteristics have been associated to Blackness through the comparison with the ‘other’. At colonial times, Whiteness was associated to civilisation. By binary opposition, Blackness was associated to nature, and therefore primitive and infantile. Those are stereotypes. They persisted and were altered with time, although they are still there nowadays (Hall, 1997(2), p. 249).

Hall gives examples, saying that stereotypes might make a person think that race guarantee things. For instance, whether a work of art produced by a person who biologically belongs the race associated with that art is good or not. Or in politics, that a certain person doesn’t think that way because the idea is viable and progressive against discrimination, but because they are Black and that is how Black people think (Hall, 1997(1)). These two examples are to show how, as Hall wrote: “Stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature.” (Hall, 1997(2), p. 257)

Something else that is important about stereotyping is that it is also about splitting between what is normal and what is abnormal, which tends to happen when there are important power inequalities. In that situation, broadcasting stereotypes can be used by those in power to justify their position (Hall, 1997(2)). The differences become then signifiers signifying other characteristics only because it is in the cultural discourse.

Race is such a signifier. Nowadays, racial thinking and stereotypes are strongly frowned upon. However, they are still present (Hall, 1997(1)). The meanings attach to skin colour are given by



discourse and representation. If in media, Black people are always represented as poor or uneducated, the meaning of poor will become attached to the concept of Blackness for the viewers. Some media are trying to break the pattern by separating the signifier from the meaning. However, it is met with other kinds of criticism if done without addressing the present issues related to stereotypes.

#### 2.3.2.2 Gender as a signifier

In a similar binary opposition characterisation pattern, masculinity and femininity have been culturally associated with numerous meanings. Masculinity is often seen as characterised by aggression, competitiveness, emotional ineptitude and coldness, toughness, hardness, and being in control. This stereotype of masculinity is actually harmful for men, who are pressured to subscribe to a “true masculinity” seen as a unitary category (Hall, 1997(2), pp. 296-319)

Femininity, as binary opposite of masculinity, has been associated with feelings, which might explain while men are often reticent to count themselves as viewers or consumers of media associated with female culture. Women in media, also, are stereotypical representations of what characteristics are perceived as feminine. Yet, the question of how to fix it remains difficult to answer. How to separate “man” and “woman” from their stereotypical signifiers? Carefulness in featuring well-rounded characters in media is often seen as a solution. However, stereotypes are present also in the real world and featuring them is also a valid way of articulating reality in a media work (Hall, 1997(2), pp. 345-346).

#### 2.3.2.3 Stereotypes as a hegemonic tool

Like mentioned above, there are other characteristics used by individual to identify themselves to which stereotypes are attached: age, body type, sexual orientation, cultural background, etc. Individuals will define those classifications for themselves and by comparison with others who are different. Following this logic, everyone should be somebody else’s ‘other’, and different cultural groups will have different meanings associated with the categories. However, this is without accounting for ethnocentrism and cultural hegemony.

Ethnocentrism is an aspect of power that appears when one culture applies its own norms on others’ cultures. A good example of the phenomenon is orientalism as explained by Foucault, with a

stereotype created of foreign cultures by sole comparison to the known western culture, and therefore associating the others with strangeness, exoticism, and savagery (Hall, 1997(2), pp. 258-259).

Ethnocentrism is a normal reflex when encountered with something foreign. The brain wants to understand, categorise things, and does so according to previously acquired knowledge. However, not all cultural groups are equal in their influence. If a group owns the means of production and circulation of a society's ideas, they can subject the masses to their own ethnocentric understanding of the different cultures and people. This way, a dominant class has the power to spread an ideology legitimating the social relation of domination and oppression present in the society, making it appear natural. This is ideological domination, cultural hegemony: when ideas justifying a group's superiority over others become internalised, even by those for whom they are harmful (Hall, 1997(2), pp. 347-348).

Nowadays, the awareness towards existing hegemonies is spreading and people are attempting to fight it by non-hegemonic media production. Yet, fighting widely spread stereotypes is not as straightforward as it seems. If not representing minority groups at all keeps them as an 'other' by not acknowledging their existence, positive representation should be done without falling in the trap of stereotypes, while also not being one-dimensionally positive in order to go away from the binary idea opposing good and bad (Hall, 1997(2), p. 273). The matter of representation in media will be discussed further in a following section.

### 2.3.3 Impact of visuality

The notion of messages conveyed through media has been presented in this work. Still there are several ways in which meaning can be carried by media, especially audio-visual media such as video games: textual discourse, narration, mechanics, and also visuals, images.

As the other enumerated elements, "Images are tools in the social construction of reality" (Stocchetti, 2017, p. 38). Images can be signs associated with a meaning, which will be culturally attached to different signifiers, as discussed above. Images can also be symbols to which meanings has been attached in a political process. In processes of meaning-giving, some participants with more power in a society will have more influence than others, as explained above, especially in

situation of ideological domination or cultural hegemony. Images being important in the social representation of different phenomena, competing social identities will attempt to attach different meanings to them, attempting to appropriate or re-appropriate different signs (Stocchetti, 2017, p. 41). In this way, images can be led to have competing meanings simultaneously. If images can come to be associated to a social phenomenon and become one of its signifiers, then, the meanings already attached to the image can also become attached to the phenomenon, creating a bi-directional meaning-making relationship: “the phenomenon gives social meaning to the image as much as the image gives social meaning to the phenomenon” (Stocchetti, 2017, p. 41).

Occurrences attaching new meanings to concepts or images can be called *event*. An event will trigger a production of meaning. More or less dramatic, they will force a re-definition of a social identities by activating deeply seated ideas or beliefs. The event is something that a social community experiences as a fundamental challenge to their understanding of different signs and images; something that cannot be ignored and that requires a response in terms of re-adjustment (Stocchetti, 2017, p. 41).

In the gaming world, Gamergate was certainly one of these events challenging accepted meanings and requiring change. Without going too far into the narration of the event, it can be said that the wave of harassment received by some female and other minorities members of the game communities (Dewey, 2014) highlighted racism and misogyny that had been for long denounced without attracting much attention (Burgess, et al., 2011; Neely, 2017; Sarkeesian, 2017). The denunciation grew stronger, forcing the game industry and communities into a reflection (Zecher, 2014). Some decided to make efforts towards inclusiveness. Others felt that their culture was attacked and built their own representation system in a defensive way (Stocchetti, 2017, p. 43).

While those counter-meanings are created, it is however impossible to erase the first given meaning, so different meanings, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, compete in society, dominating in different sub-communities. Acceptance of a meaning or another can be quite divisive. If it is a highly polemic topic, it will define membership and acceptance in certain groups by the other members (Stocchetti, 2017, p. 46). For instance, after Gamergate, some gamers feeling the need to defend their culture against those criticizing how it is treating women will be excluding from their circles those who advocate for less stereotypical representations.

### 2.3.4 Types of representation in media

Awareness about the need for proper representation has been raised among media creators in the last years. Different creators have tried different solutions to give more representation. As introduced sooner, it can be more difficult than it first looks like (Nikunen, 2013). For instance, creators wanting to represent things as they think they are can find themselves falling into stereotypical representation, which will only reinforce the stereotypes. Solely positive representation of minorities is not the best help that can be provided, because it keeps those groups in the binary pattern of being either good or bad. It is harmful, because it pressures those individuals to be perfect in order to be seen as good, while they should be able to be seen simply as human.

Another solution that has been tried was to feature what Sarita Malik (2013) calls “creative diversity.” In media made with creative diversity, roles in the narrative are given to people of different visible ethnicity or coming from different cultural background without those differences being addressed in any way in the storytelling. It is as if the characters don’t see the differences. In those media works, race is depoliticised without recognition of social and cultural differences, be it positive or negative. Malik calls it a “falsely post-racial understanding” and explains how it is only picturing a state of racelessness instead of a state where racial equality has been achieved (Malik, 2013). Hall goes in the same direction as Malik, explaining that showing only post-racial society, in the present context, could be counter-productive because it is as if the problems regarding race don’t exist anymore, which is not the case. If it is important to show different people being treated equally, the struggles faced by minorities should also be addressed and not hidden (Hall, 1997; Nikunen, 2013).

What is shown in media about society is important, because it broadcasts cultural meanings that can influence people’s thoughts and behaviours and have concrete effects (Bandura, 1977; Kirsh, 2010; Malik, 2013). Previous studies have shown that television and movies viewers can experiment with social possibilities and consequences through identification with the characters. These studies should be expanded on video games, since their interactivity and level of immersion make them ideal tools for such experimentation. Through them, players can try different characteristics and explore possible benefits and repercussions of their choices (Hart, 2017). They

can allow users to experiment a bit of what it is to live as somebody of another colour, gender, etc., which can elicit better understanding of others and empathy. However, that is true only if the representation is available and well done.

## 2.4 Representation in digital games

As stated previously, games can be understood as ideological systems reflecting the offline culture in which they were created and meant to be played (Corneliussen, 2008, p. 65). This thesis is exploring the possibility that since the players subconsciously expect that reflection, what they experience in the game world can impact their vision of how the society around them is, or rather, how it should be.

In the article *No Player is Ideal*, Neely writes about the designers' moral responsibility to treat all players and potential players as human beings having an intrinsic worth. This means that creating games only for the traditional "easy to design for" stereotypical white male is, nowadays, a statement that others don't deserve to be designed for (Neely, 2017). Furthermore, she argues that it can actually prevent those players from enjoying some aspects of the game for no reasons, since it could have been prevented without affecting much the game design (Neely, 2017, pp. 98-99). For example, those players might have more difficulties feeling included in the game world or identifying to their avatar, which would hinder their possibility to enjoy the game as much as other players, closer to the stereotypical player identity, could.

Nowadays, video games are everywhere: people play on their computers, on consoles, on their phone, offline and online. Although not all players identify as gamers, it is a fact that half of the adult population in the United States plays games (Neely, 2017, p. 98). Not designing for everybody means ignoring numerous clients and perpetuating the image that belonging in the society and the gaming community means being a white male, while it can often be fixed without harming the game design.

Along with the problem of lack in different ethnic representation, there is also the now traditional sexualization of characters. Sexualizing characters by showing overly grown muscles and aggressive behavior for male characters and picturing obvious sexual availability – large breasts, slim waist, generous hips, curved back, revealing clothing – on female characters is something

typical to videogames. Although recent studies showed that exposition to hyper sexualized gender representations increased tendencies to objectify women and higher tolerance to sexual harassment (Burgess, et al., 2011, p. 290), that tendency in video game character design is still visible.

Those consequences on players are the reasons why not only representation, but also the way of doing it matters. In an experiment where participants were exposed to video games picturing Black characters, afterwards, those participants displayed more negative stereotyping associating Black people with violent behavior (Burgess, et al., 2011, p. 307). That is how Black people were depicted in the games: the participants just assimilated what they were exposed to.

As shown by such studies, the consequences in having mostly white characters is not only about a limited representation, but also related to a tendency to present non-white characters in a stereotypical way. Neely qualifies it as pervasive, because the players might not realize immediately that they are looking at a stereotype and it can therefore affect real-world behaviors towards people of color (Neely, 2017, p. 102).

Finding the right way to design for inclusive representation can present a challenge to game developers, whether it is because of a lack of knowledge or means to do so. However, awareness rising regarding those issues has been important in the last years and designers are increasingly considering it their responsibility to make games more accessible to all potential players (Neely, 2017, p. 106).

An example of a game that would have easily been more accessible is *World of Warcraft*. Created by Blizzard Entertainment (2004) and is an immense online multiplayer. The fantasy world is also populated by numerous non-playable characters (NPCs) giving quests or selling items to the players. Unfortunately, all the NPCs from humanoid races – namely humans and elves – are White (Neely, 2017, p. 110), which may impact the non-White players' ability to feel included in the game world and could have been easily fixed without harming the game design.

Neely explains that, as video games are flourishing, designers have the responsibility to treat all players and potential players justly, especially by avoiding replicating or reinforcing prejudices existing in the real world. Her argument is that designing for an idealized gamer, typically a straight white male, means perpetuating the society's power imbalances unnecessarily and penalizing

players who do not match the stereotype. Design choices should be made consciously with awareness of their potential effects on different groups of players (Neely, 2017, p. 111).

#### 2.4.1 Ethnic representation in video games

Different studies observing top-selling video game magazines and video game covers showed a frequent use of racial stereotypes and an absence of representation of non-White females. Males from ethnic minorities are present, but generally underrepresented and mostly portrayed as more athletic and more aggressive than their White counterparts. They are also less likely to be pictured using technology than White males (Burgess, et al., 2011, p. 289).

Representation of people of color in media has an influence on the way they are perceived in real life. Stereotypes are pervasive as they have cognitive and affective components. For example, a systematic portrayal of Black males as being aggressive will teach the viewers that it is normal to be afraid when being approach by a Black male, even in real life (Burgess, et al., 2011, pp. 291-292). A study showed that participants would identify violent stimuli from Black character faster than with White characters, showing that their image in video games evokes racial stereotypes (Burgess, et al., 2011, p. 290). Online worlds are not race-blind, only constructing identities and stereotypes in other ways with effects on players that need to be assessed (Langer, 2008). This is especially true for Overwatch, since the characters are in an imagined future Earth.

#### 2.4.2 Gender representation in video games

In the past, computer games received a lot of criticism for being made by boys and for boys. Nowadays, they are including more and more female protagonists and it becomes relevant to look at how the game designs consider gender and what framework it offers for gender perception (Corneliussen, 2008, p. 65).

The stereotype that girls and women don't like video games still exists while in fact, women over 40 years-old spend in average more time playing – mostly puzzles or card games – than teenagers. Still, the stereotype is strong enough that it still causes insecurities for female players, even when they are highly skilled (Corneliussen, 2008, p. 82).

As critics point it out, the early computer games picturing strong male heroes and passive female victims probably contributed to give a sexist image to game communities (Corneliussen, 2008, p. 66). The first attempts in the 1990s period to design games for girls also had mitigated results. The “pink games” wave that took place during that period presented games centered on social relationships between the characters, targeting young girls while supposing a static image of gender. In that way, they did the same mistake as previous video games: they forgot about differences and variety between different people and that everybody was not the same (Corneliussen, 2008, pp. 66-67).

During the same period, some female characters for older audience were released, starting with Lara Croft in Tomb Raider (Core Design, 1996). However, they were met also with a lot of criticism. Some questioned whether the characters were really created to empower females or to satisfy the male gaze (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2013, p. 173; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). It is true that the characters were, more often than not, presenting sexualized features and would be seen partially or totally nude at some point of the game. While it is true that male characters are also sexualized, with exaggerated muscles and steroidal masculinity, it was still seen as less harmful since big muscles don’t symbolize only sexual availability, but also power, while big breasts don’t (Corneliussen, 2008, p. 67).

In the media industry nowadays, there are talks about how the need for more diversity with characters of different origins, ages, sexual orientations, abilities etc. The avatar especially matters in games, because the player can develop a special relation to it, as it will be explained in the next section.

#### 2.4.1 The role of Avatars

As previously discussed, videogames are different from other media because they are interactive. The player is sometimes offered unactorialized control, especially in mobile and virtual reality games, making them interact directly with the game environment. In order to interact with the game world, the player will often be given a specific object in the game to act as its connection to the world, called the avatar (Hart, 2017).



In early videogames, the avatar was only that, an object to be controlled by the player. One could think about Mario in *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo, 1985) or Link in *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986). New games, however, allow avatar customization, for example by letting the player choose some skills that may have an important impact on the story, or by allowing the player to create their avatar. While recent role-playing games often offer some cosmetic choices to the player, like different hair colours or clothing style, some proud themselves by offering almost complete character customization, like *The Elder Scrolls Online* (ZeniMax Online Studios, 2015). The avatar then becomes more than a mere interaction tool: it becomes an object of self-representation for the player. If the player identifies to the avatar, they might get the feeling of becoming it and become really immersed in the game world. This is called a monadic interaction (Hart, 2017). In the perspective that an avatar is not only a digital tool to interact with a digital space, but potentially a projection of the user, enough customization choices should be available to allow every potential player the same immersion opportunity.

Players often wish to self-represent when playing a video game, which means that they will to their avatar attributes they believe they have. The perception one might have of themselves is often not accurate, however the way individuals see themselves is often important to them. Players might also choose to have an avatar that would be an enhanced self-representation, which mean they will represent their ideal self and give their avatar attributes they would wish to have (Hart, 2017; Passmore & Mandryk, 2018). Research also shows a tendency in other players to express themselves by creating an original avatar and experiment with alternative self-concepts (Hart, 2017).

Some game scholars are partisan to another theory, presenting the argument that identification to the character is not much connected to its appearance, but rather to its capacities, meaning that a player will feel more connected to an avatar with capacities matching their playstyle than one they find difficult to use, no matter their appearance. While it is true that abilities are important to players in order to feel comfortable with the gameplay and immersed in the game, they are also often connected to the appearance of characters, so the line separating appearance and abilities can be blurry (Tronstad, 2008, p. 249).

Furthermore, there are different ways of understanding the notion of identification. While the highest level of monadic interaction is when the player has the impression of “being” the character (Hart, 2017), a player can still identify to a character and get the impression to experience what the character experiences without feeling that they are identical to it (Tronstad, 2008, p. 251).

An avatar has two functions in a game: representing the player in their interaction with the game world and the other players and being a player’s agency to interact with the game mechanics. Scholars advocating for the prevalence of abilities over appearance in the identification to the character argue that while more inexperienced players might choose a character based on appearance, a miss-matched with their preferred gameplay will make difficult the progresses in the game. Therefore, avatar appearance should not matter to more experimented players (Tronstad, 2008, p. 255).

Even though the appearance of the avatar can be difficult to choose because of the game connecting abilities to specific looks, when the players have the choice, the customization options do matter because allowing some changes while not allowing others can be seen as a statement in who the game was intended for. Appearance of non-playable characters seen in the environment matters too (Langer, 2008).

Some recent games have been applauded for picturing characters of different identities or, like for example *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games, 2017), having an imposed avatar who is not a White male. *Overwatch* is one of those games. However, unlike most of the games mentioned in the last pages, it is not a role-playing game, but a first-person shooter.

#### 2.4.2 Inclusiveness in first person shooters

In first person shooter games, as the name indicates, the player interacts with the game from a first-person point of view, as through the eyes of the avatar. Consequently, during the game, the avatar hardly seen. Often, the player will see only its hands and the held weapons.

However, it doesn’t mean that the identity of the avatar or the representation offered by the available customization or playable character doesn’t matter. As other scholars stated it, making some options available or not can send a message about who is considered as a potential player by the creators.

Michael Hitchens published in 2011 an analysis of the avatars offered in FPSs between 1991 and 2009. The statistics are now old of a decade. However, they still give a good impression of the tendency and tradition in design of FPSs.

The first classification observed in the study is the gender of the available avatars. Altogether, it was possible to play a female avatar in only 19% of the surveyed games, showing a lack of gender inclusiveness. For the ethnicity, the amount of non-White playable characters was also quite low. Overall, only 25% offered the option of playing a non-White character. Hitchens also noted that in the games where the avatar was not enforced and a choice among pre-set characters was offered, it was never impossible to play a White male. Often the options were such as five different Caucasian characters and one Africa-American (Hitchens, 2011).

Hitchens observed that the racial choice was very limited especially concerning female avatars. Of the 20 games in the study enforcing a female avatar (on a total of 566 games), 18 of them enforced a Caucasian female (Hitchens, 2011), showing a serious lack in intersectionality that is still discussed nowadays in game research (Castiello Jones, et al., 2013).

Another aspect that has been observed by Hitchens was the background of the avatars, which are overwhelmingly soldiers (Hitchens, 2011). The full list of observed avatar background is visible in the figure 2.1. While the background or profession is not always a visible characteristic, it is still something used by individuals to identify themselves and is a way player can be able to identify to a character. Having characters of different backgrounds can participate in making players feel welcomed to play a game.

Overall, the study found out that the playable characters offered by FPS games were mostly Caucasian males with a military background, which shows a lack of inclusiveness in the character design.

Background of Avatar	Overall	Personal Computer Only	Console Only	Titles Available On both
Military	287	148	58	81
Civilian	36	15	2	19
Intelligence	34	17	7	10
Mercenary	27	10	9	8
Police	25	10	7	8
Warrior	17	11	0	6
Criminal	15	7	3	5
Magic-user	9	7	0	2
Gunslinger	7	4	0	3
Rebel	7	5	1	1
Hacker	5	4	1	0
Terrorist	3	2	0	1
Supernatural	3	3	0	0

Figure 2.1 Background of Avatars in FPSs (Hitchens, 2011)

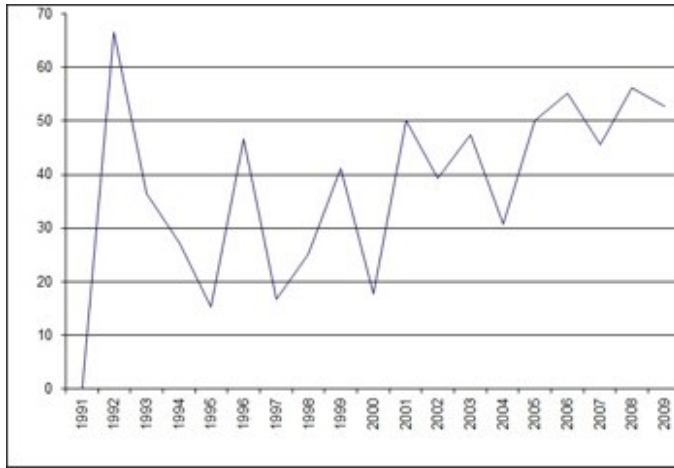


Figure 2.2 Percentage of releases with Caucasian male avatars with military background over time (Hitchens, 2011)

Regarding first-person shooter games, it is often argued that the avatar matters little since it is not seen often, and therefore not brought to the player's attention. However, that is forgetting that FPSs with a story often present cut scenes in which the avatar is fully visible, or even show the character's face in the interface. Noticing suddenly one's avatar, when there is no or little identification to the character, can break immersion (Hitchens, 2011).

Altogether, the lack of diversity in FPSs' avatar options shown in Hitchens' study shows a tendency that is still felt in video game culture. It is also demonstrating how innovative is the inclusivity intention shown in Overwatch's designs, which are introduced in the following chapter.

### 3 *OVERWATCH* – SHORT PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE GAME

The game used in this study is *Overwatch*. *Overwatch* is produced by Blizzard Entertainment Inc. (Activision Blizzard Inc., 2019) The game was released on May 24<sup>th</sup> 2016 and is still on-going (Gamepedia, 2019). The developers keep releasing new content regularly, like new characters, new maps, or new events. The game is presently an esports (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019).

All the information presented in this chapter, as in the rest of the thesis, consider the game as it was at the time of the interviews, which was in December 2018. *Overwatch* is an on-going game, which means that since its release, it is continuously updated, and new content is regularly added to the game. Here, the game is considered as it was after the November 18<sup>th</sup> 2018 patch, which marked the release of the twenty-ninth hero, Ashe (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019).

In order for this thesis to be able to stand by itself as a complete work that allows readers less familiar with the game to still understand the study, an annexe was added containing a presentation of every playable character in *Overwatch* as of December 2018. The annexe is intended as a reference for the reader to use along with the text.

#### 3.1 Gameplay

*Overwatch* is a first-person shooter (FPS), which means that it is a shooting game in which the player sees the game world from the point of view of the character they control. It is as if the ‘camera’ was in the eyes of the character (Hitchens, 2011). As it is typically in FPS games, the player character is barely seen at all by the player controlling it: during a match, an *Overwatch* player will see only the weapon and one or two hands of their character most of the time. There are, although, exceptions: in *Overwatch*, the players will see their own character if they use emotes, or if they use some specific abilities such as shielding<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The exceptions abilities during which a player will pass to a third person point of view are Barrier Field, Barrier Shield, Charge, Cryo-freeze, Death Blossom, Grappling Claw, Meteor Strike, Rip-tire, Roll, Shadow Step, and Transcendence (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019).

While the game has a variety of modes during which the players can practice their skills, such as free-for-all death matches or custom games, the basic mechanic, the main game mode used for competitive play is to put two teams of six players against each other. The team fight for the control of the map objective, be it a fixed area or a payload that must be brought to a certain destination.

Before the match, each player must choose a character from the roster. During a match, the players can swap character while in the spawning area. Teammates cannot play the same character at the same time. At the moment of doing the interviews for this study, there were twenty-eight playable characters in the game, divided in three types: damage per second (DPS) characters, that are high-damage, but also with a limited life number of health points; tanks, that can take a lot of damage and protect their teammates from it; and healers. All the characters have different abilities, so a good team composition requires some thoughts about matching each other's play style and sometimes countering the opponents'.

The game puts a heavy emphasis on teamwork. In the introductory instructions on Overwatch's website, the player is already recommended to stick with his team (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019). At the end of matches in the main game mode, players are invited to 'command' other players who played especially well, which will give experience points to those players. Also, in competitive ranking matches, the points are awarded according to the team performance, meaning if the team wins or loses. This means that even if a player is especially gifted, if they don't work well enough with their team to win the game, they won't go up in the rankings. Blizzard Entertainment Inc. is putting a lot of efforts into preventing toxic behaviour in-game with a reporting system and positive reinforcement mechanics called 'endorsements' (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019).

### 3.2 Inclusivity intend

Above all other characteristics the game has, the one that made it most interesting for the purpose of this study was that the game's developers were being actively careful about inclusivity in their designs. Overwatch's game director Jeff Kaplan explains the intend as follows: "What we cared about was creating a game in a game universe in a world where everybody felt welcomed. And really what the goal was inclusivity and open mindedness." (Kaplan, 2017)

Even though there are not characters representing every cultural group on Earth, by having characters highly different from each other, the developers hoped that players could still imagine having a hero representing their area or culture in the game and that it would be totally plausible (Kaplan, 2017).

In the same speech, Mr. Kaplan said being aware of shooter games' tendency to feature the stereotypical "grizzled soldier dude" and that for that reason, Overwatch was especially proud to have characters that break stereotypes, like an Egyptian mom with a complicated relationship with her daughter, or a lesbian time-travelling justice defender (the game's poster girl).

Kaplan goes on and defends that the Overwatch team never had any political motivations by making those design choices. He explains that team only think of it as a way to show that "normal things are normal." They don't want Overwatch to be a political game, although Kaplan acknowledges that it is "fascinating to see that the values of the Overwatch team are now being embraced and owned by the community in their own positive way." (Kaplan, 2017)

The way Overwatch was designed for inclusivity is interesting, because it is quite close to creative diversity as described by Malik (2013) in the sense that it makes sure to present characters that all are different skin colours and yet are working together without any allusion to difficulties associated with race. However, in Overwatch, cultural differences are acknowledged and even connected to skin colour. Therefore, it is not presenting a culturally uniform, colour-blind futuristic world.

### 3.3 Is it creative diversity?

Skin colour or cultural background may not be a source of discrimination in Overwatch, it doesn't mean that those differences are not acknowledged or not linked to stereotypes. In fact, the Overwatch designers are not shying away from stereotypes, as Kaplan (2017) explains it himself: for example, they enjoy giving heavy accents to their characters, or giving them other characteristics stereotypically associated with people coming from their country. The American characters are no exception: two of the four are based on the Far West imaginary, and the two others have a military background.

Furthermore, the skin colour of the characters has always been, so far, a signifier of their cultural background and origin. It is usually not the case in pieces of creative diversity, since the skin colour is simply ignored. While in *Overwatch*, we have yet to see, for example, a Black Englishman or an Asian-American. This is interesting, considering that the game setting is in the future: one would think that, with all the migration movements happening right now, people would be a lot more mixed in the future. Yet, there is no grey zone in ethnicity and nobody with double nationality or something related to that, although at least one character has parents coming from different countries. That choice of design is not without weight: *Overwatch* aims to “shown normal things as normal”, and yet that doesn’t include people of various ancestries living in the same nation. Using stereotypes that way doesn’t confront nationalist stereotypes or racism.

*Overwatch*’s designers may not have had a direct political intend when making those decisions for their characters; however, numerous players see the inclusive intend as a statement (D’Anastasio, 2017), a representation of what they think society should be. To start with, there was politicisation of some elements, the best example being the character D.Va who became a the mascot of a Korean feminist activist group. Also, as Kaplan said it himself: “the values of the *Overwatch* team are now being embraced and owned by the community” (Kaplan, 2017). Media works carry the values of the team who produce them (Flanagan & Nissembaum, 2014), in this case it shows what the team sees as normal in society, what are the categories of people they include in their understanding of the world. It is normal for people to have some sort of classification system, an internalized system of meaning allowing an easier understanding of the world (Hall, 1997, p. 10). The design of *Overwatch*’s characters clearly shows the classification system of the people who created them: the characters all have different characteristics and even belong to more than one category at once. There is for example a homosexual female pilot from England, an Arab grandmother who is also a sniper and a healer, a Black musician who is also an activist, etc. However, all those characteristics fit in the classification boxes. Maybe it is voluntarily caricatured, which could be possible and would fit with the cartoony style of the game. Still, the fact is that those characteristics are without ambivalence, meaning that the characters are gendered in a way that either they are male or female, there is no possible doubt or non-binary character; all character’s nationalities are clearly identified and visible; characters for which we know the sexual orientation have a very clear one also, attracted either to men or women. All the characteristics fit in boxes. There is no grey zone.



In conclusion, the efforts for inclusivity are visible, and the progress compared to older shooter games real. However, the inclusivity is still selected and, therefore, exclusive of those who don't fit in the classification system according to which the media work was created.

### 3.4 Short analysis of the “shell” of the game

#### 3.4.1 The world of Overwatch

The narrative premises and the goals of a game can carry values according to what kind of goal the player is pursuing and how important the narrative is for the game (Flanagan & Nissebaum, 2014, p. 35). In Overwatch, the goal is simple: master the different heroes' abilities, become the hero your team needs to win. The goals are self-improvement and team-work oriented. The lore or narrative, however, has a very limited role as it is possible to play the game without knowing much about it. Also, the narrative is not directly available in the game. The players will maybe here some voice lines commenting on past events or revealing relationships between the characters. Yet, if they want to know more, they will have to go on the official website watch the animations, read the comics and the short stories. However, as it will be clear while reading the analysis part of this work, the interviewees were all well-versed in the Overwatch lore and seemed attached to the story, which is why it is presented here.

Overwatch is the name of an international task force of heroes from around the globe who came together to restore the peace on Earth. After succeeding in ending the war and keeping the peace for a generation, the force was forced to disband. But now, in 2076, a new conflict is rising and the heroes are once again called upon. This is the setting of the game. Much more detailed explanations and lore are available on the game's website if the players are interested. Yet, this is all is needed to understand roughly what is going on and play the game.

The past conflict was a World War against the Omnics, artificial intelligences who became self-aware and decided to destroy humanity to gain their freedom. The humans won the war when Overwatch destroyed their command control and protocol, putting an end to the Omnic Crisis. Peace accords were then signed and now humans and Omnics live mostly in peace. In fact, three playable characters in the game are Omnics (Gamepedia, 2019).

However, the Omnic Crisis greatly affected some parts of the world and orphaned numerous children. Consequently, there are still tensions between Omnics and Humans. This fact is especially interesting as in the game world, there is no racism between the humans. However, some Human characters are intolerant towards the Omnics, something that is often seen as a metaphor for racism in our societies.

As the Omnics are considered as a strange, alien “other” by some characters in the game, the metaphor, combine with the mechanics of the game, give a clear message. Team work and collaboration being essential if the players want to win, it could be said here that the mechanics send a message of tolerance and collaboration. As do stories or images, game mechanics can also send messages through their processes (Bogost, 2008).

The gameplay and the narrative in Overwatch can be both analysed as being dissonant and not. On one hand, the fact that characters can freely team up together or fight each other in matches with no regards for their allegiance is a ludo-narrative dissonance. On the other, the values carried by the global setting and the gameplay promoting teamwork and cooperation, those are not contradictory with the developers intend of promoting inclusiveness and openness.

### 3.4.2 The playable characters

When the interviews for this study were done, there were twenty-nine pre-set playable characters in Overwatch. Playable characters are characters that can be controlled by the players; one would say that the player can ‘become’ them, or that they can become the player’s mean of interacting with the game world. In an alternative typology, the characters in Overwatch might be considered avatars as they are a non-intrusive representation of the player that cannot be seen because of the first-person point of view (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2013, pp. 203-204).

In Overwatch the playable characters are pre-set, which means that the designs cannot be customized by the players. It means that everything making the character comes in a package: its appearance, its weapon, and its abilities. It is not possible, for example, to choose a certain character and decide to change its weapon. In Overwatch, the only customizations allowed are some pre-made voice lines, character poses, and “skins.” Skins are the only way to customize the physical appearance of the character. There are pre-set and most of them only change the color of

the character's outfit and maybe its hair. Some rarer skins in Overwatch also change other parts of the visual design. Still, it is purely cosmetic and doesn't change anything to the gameplay.



*Figure 3.1 Three of Genji's different skins. In order, the 'classic', basic skin; the Carbon Fiber; and, a rarer one, the Baihu (Gamepedia, 2019)*

The way characters are designed in video games carries values (Flanagan & Nissembaum, 2014, p. 38). In Overwatch, the game is not directly designed so the player would develop a very close relationship with the character, since the design of the game invites the players to switch for one character to another. Yet, as it will be discussed later in the analysis, numerous players understood the interest in specializing in using one or few characters and will consequently become relatively close to the character(s) they use the most. Furthermore, with the first-person point of view, the player can really immerse themselves in the game and feel like they are becoming the character and are in the game world (Flanagan & Nissembaum, 2014, p. 53).

As mentioned previously, as part of the inclusivity intend of the designers, the Overwatch characters each present different characteristic making them unique and making it possible for many people to feel represented in the game. It is also relevant to note that in Overwatch, one character can present more than one identities or particularities. Whereas in older shooter games, it was usual to see a character roster with white men, one Black man and a white woman as character choices; not a Black woman, because that would be two 'special' particularities. In Overwatch, one character can have multiple sides.

Ana is a good example of this multi-dimensionality of the characters: she is a 60-year-old mother, she is Egyptian, speaks Arabic, wears a headscarf, and is an incredible sniper. Lucio is an internationally-known musician who is Black, Brazilian, and an activist advocating for freedom. D.Va is a Korean teenager who is a mecha technician and driver, previously Starcraft number one player, and a star featuring in some movies. In this sense, the characters have, as normal people, multi-faceted personalities and more than one characteristic defining their identity.

There are some characteristics that are considered quite defining for individual nowadays in our cultures: the place of origin, national identity or socio-economical background; the skin colour; the gender; the sexual orientation; and the age (Hall, 1997). In Overwatch, they do use those ways to define the characters, along with also the body type, the profession, the allegiance, the specie, the role, and how difficult it is to learn to use its abilities. Here will follow an analysis of how those characteristics are distributed amongst Overwatch playable characters. All the numbers found in this section have been counted by myself from the information found on the Overwatch official website (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019). The proportions of characters owning each type of characteristic are shown in corresponding figures found in the annexe, after the presentation of the characters.

#### *3.4.2.1 Class*

As previously introduced, there are three classes, or roles, a character can have in Overwatch: damage dealer, tank, or support. The damage dealer characters, called DPS, usually have weapons and abilities making them able to damage and eliminate other characters quickly. However, they usually don't survive a lot of damage themselves, which is where the tanks come into play. The tanks are characters that can sustain a great deal of damage. They are usually bigger than DPSs, making them more attractive targets for the opponents. Thus, they are protecting their teammates from damage by receiving it themselves, allowing their DPS teammates to do their work. Some tanks also have shield abilities. The support characters, then, have the role to ensure that everybody else stays alive. They will have healing abilities restoring their teammates' health pool and perhaps other tools to help their team be more efficient. There are sub-categories used to classify the different abilities by each characters, since some of them will thrive in different situation due to be more or less mobile or have longer or shorter range, for example, but the three

main types used by the game's classification system are those three. Although the most popular type to specialize in is DPS, a typical 'balanced team' in an Overwatch match will be made of two DPS, two tanks and two supports.

Offering the different types of role is part of inclusivity in the design of the game, because it is often not the same type of players or person who will want to play the different types of characters. While the game concept could work if all the characters were the same type, having that much differences between the characters' abilities is allowing more people to feel welcome to play. Previous research showed that the preferred type of role to play in a game like Overwatch can depend on several factors in a person's personality like degrees of extroversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, self-monitoring and perfectionist self-representation (Hodges & Buckley, 2018, p. 171). With the 29<sup>th</sup> character in Overwatch being a DPS, presently in the game, sixteen characters are DPSs, seven are tanks, and six are support.

#### *3.4.2.2 Playing difficulty*

Some characters in Overwatch have abilities that can take several hours of practice to master, while others are more straightforward or simply require less speed or accuracy. Offering characters for players with different level of skills is making the game more inclusive by allowing players who are less experimented in competitive games to join and still be an important asset for their teammates. The level of difficulty to master a character can vary according to a player's previous experiences or predispositions, but Overwatch still has a three-levels classification system helping the players to identify the different level of skills required for the different heroes, one being the lowest and three the highest. At the time of the interviews, there are eight difficulty one, twelve difficulty two, and nine difficulty three heroes.

#### *3.4.2.3 The Allegiance*

This one was more problematic to identify clearly, because some characters have a complicated background story and changed allegiance. However, the allegiances used here are the 'main' ones for each character, so the one that defines who they are during the game. At the moment of the game in the Overwatch lore, twelve characters are loyal to Overwatch; five to the criminal organisation Talon, dark pendant and foe of Overwatch; four are fighting for the defense of their

own land; one is part of a criminal organisation; one working for a private company; and six are answering to no one but themselves.

#### *3.4.2.4 Specialty or profession*

Following the inclusive intend, Overwatch present heroes with various professional backgrounds. Some of them are doctors, athletes, or artists. Still, the professions shared by the most heroes are the classic one found in shooter games: eight have a background with the military, six are criminals, and four are scientists. The complete list is available in the figure in the annexe.

#### *3.4.2.5 Region of origin*

Overwatch's characters meant to come from all around the world, and beyond, since some of them have been raised on the moon, which is now colonized in the game world. At the moment of doing the interviews, there were four characters from Africa, six from Asia, nine from Europe, five from North America, two from Oceania, one from South America, and two from the moon colony. As the numbers show it, the characters do come from every continent. However, their numbers are not representative of the numbers of people in each part of the world and like in most shooter games, Westerners are over-represented (48% of the characters).

#### *3.4.2.6 Country of origin*

Overwatch's characters are coming from seventeen different countries, without counting the moon colony. The complete list can be found in the corresponding figure in the annexe. Most of them are alone representing of their respective country, but some countries are represented by more than one character: Australia, Egypt, Japan, Nigeria and Sweden have each two characters, and the United States of America have four characters. Like in most shooter games, Americans are proportionally over-represented. It can be easily understood by the fact that the creators of the game are themselves living in America.

#### *3.4.2.7 Gender*

As the game is intended to make anybody feel welcomed to play, it had to break with the stereotype associated with first person shooters according to which the characters are mostly male. At the moment to do the interviews, half of the playable characters in Overwatch are male and the other

half are female. It can seem strange to claim this while the character number is uneven, however there is one character who doesn't have a gender since it is actually a robot. Its name is Bastion. Unlike the other Omnic characters, Bastion is truly a war robot and it is unsure if it is sentient or not. Therefore it was counted out of the equation here.

#### *3.4.2.8 Age*

Following again the intent of inclusivity, Overwatch presents characters from a wide range of ages: the youngest, without counting Orisa who was built less than a year ago, is D.Va who is nineteen years old, and the oldest is Reinhardt who is sixty-one years old. If their age range is divided in sections of ten years, five of them are less than 25 years old, eleven are between 25 to 34 years old, five are between 35 and 44 years old, three are between 45 and 54 years old, and five are more than 55 years old. The overrepresented age group is the one from 25 to 34 years old, who are twice as at least numerous as any other group.

#### *3.4.2.9 Species*

The importance of this category may vary depending of the point of view. However, for the rest of the analysis, it will be relevant to understand that some characters in Overwatch are not humans. As said previously, three of them are Omnics, if Bastion the war robot is included in this category, are two of them are actually animals. Winston is a gorilla and Hammond is a hamster. Both, in the lore, are from the moon colony and have been genetically enhanced to be very intelligent. Even though those characters are not human, they still carry some characteristics allowing some players to identify to them, which is why they were so far included in the numbers. However, in the two next categories, some of them will be taken out.

#### *3.4.2.10 Skin colour*

It was mentioned previously that Overwatch characters have for most of them a visible ethnicity. For this comparison, however, the non-human characters have been taken out and are classified as having 'none' since they don't correspond to any of the existing categories. There are a lot of numbers worth mentioning here, so in order to make it easier to understand, the figures included in annexe will be presented here too.

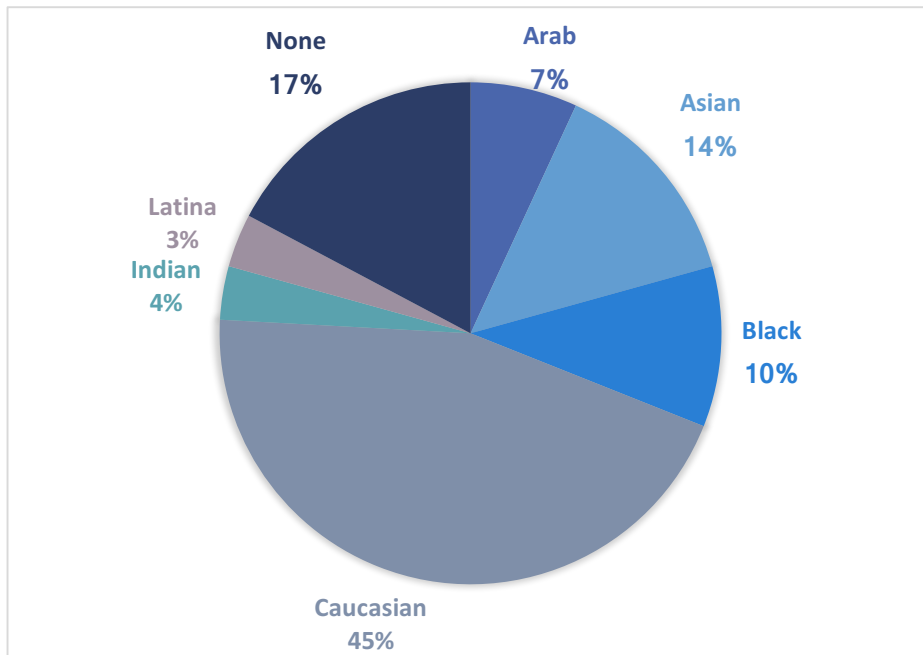


Figure 3.10 The characters' skin colour

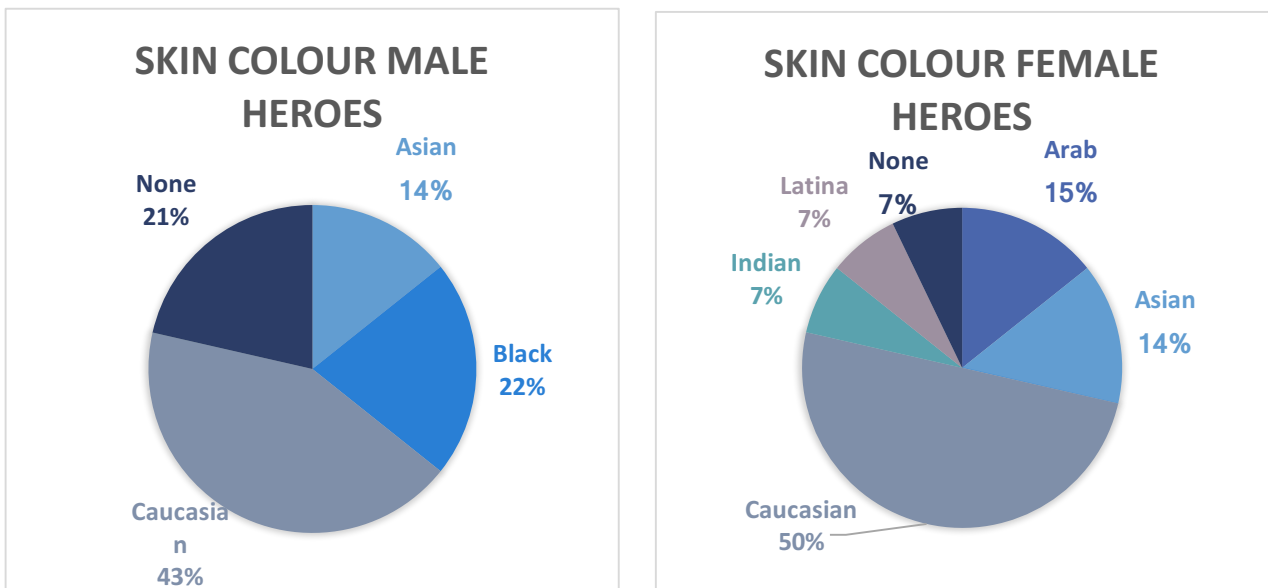


Figure 3.11 The characters' skin colour by gender

As it is visible, for a shooter game, Overwatch is doing relatively very well in representation of people of different skin colours. However, like usual according to Hitchens' findings (2011), Caucasians are overrepresented compared to other groups. Interestingly also, the female characters present more diversity of skin colour and ethnicity than the male ones, contrasting with the tendency in video games to not represent women of colour. However, there is still no Black woman



character, something that has been noticed also in Hitchens' analysis. Furthermore, there are still more Caucasian proportionally amongst the female characters than the males. It is also interesting to notice that only one of the non-human characters identifies as a female.

### *3.4.2.11 Body type*

Most of the playable characters in Overwatch have the typical 'hero' body shape as seen so often in shooter games. For the male characters, it means a V-shaped body with narrow hips and wide shoulder, more often than not with a prominent, defined musculature. For female characters, it means an hourglass-shaped body with wide hips, a narrow waist, and generous breasts. Although, there are exceptions, efforts made so people with different body types would feel included.

On the side of the male characters, seven of them have classic V-shaped bodies. However, there is one obese character, Roadhog; one dwarf character, Torbjörn; also, one who is very lean, without apparent musculature, Zenyatta. The others, Wrecking Ball and Winston, are taken out of the equation since they are respectively a hamster and a gorilla.

On the female side, eleven of them have the typical hourglass-shaped body. Among them, Tracer and D.Va have less exaggerated forms and could be said to have a 'petite' body type, however they are still respecting mostly the standard. One other character, Moira, is slenderer, with a more androgynous look. One, Mei, is rounder, breaking the 'thin waist rule'. Finally, one, Zarya, is very muscular, breaking also with the standards associated to female characters. This time, Orisa has been taken out of the equation since she looks more like a centaur than a human.

To conclude with the body types of the characters, all of them are able-bodied without visible sicknesses. Some of them have mutilations, like a missing limb, but all of those are compensated with futuristic prosthetics making it sometimes difficult to notice. The only exceptions to this rule would be Junkrat and Ana. Ana has a missing eye that is not replaced and only hidden. Junkrat has a missing leg only replaced with a contraption looking like a wooden leg. Then again, Junkrat is probably one of the most caricatured characters of the game.

### 3.4.2.12 Sexual orientation

At the moment of the interview, the sexual orientation of only four characters had been made known through their revealed backstories. Three of them have or had a heterosexual relationship and one of them, Tracer, is involved in an homosexual relationship. With Blizzard wanting to be inclusive, it can seem normal, if not expected, to have at least one LGBT+ character in Overwatch. However, it is especially interesting to notice that the said character is actually the game's poster girl. Before the release, and then on the game boxes, Tracer has been the face of Overwatch.



Figure 3.12 One of the numerous game boxes picturing Tracer (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Blizzard's choice to make one of their main character lesbian is breaking with observation by other researchers that usually, game characters with what are seen as 'unconventional' sexual or gender roles are usually minor characters who don't have much influence on the game (Pelurson, 2018). However, Tracer is a normal character in Overwatch, even an important character and is not there only to fill a quota or for some comical effect. She is just a normal character who happens to have a partner who is the same gender as her. Blizzard's choice is therefore quite a step forward for inclusiveness of LGBT+ people in video games.

### 3.4.3 The maps

Overwatch's matches take on maps that are representing different parts of the world. Deciding what part of the world the maps are showing and how that part of the world is depicted by the map design is important in video games, as it often reflects what the creators think of that country. It can also address in some way contemporary issues related to that area (Flanagan & Nissebaum, 2014, p. 66).

At the moment of doing the interviews, there were twenty-six different playable maps. Five of them showed locations in Asia, eight in Europe, five in North America, four in Middle East (although two of those are in Egypt, so they are also representative of North Africa), one in Sub-

Saharan Africa, one in Oceania, one in Antarctica, and one even on the moon. Once again, as with the characters, the Western world is proportionally overrepresented. Also, there is strangely no map from South America, which is interesting considering that it doesn't fit with the idea of including everybody.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Choosing a method

The goal of this study being to know more about what players experience when they play a video game with a certain level of inclusiveness, the natural reflex when looking for a method was to search on the side of players' observation. Different possibilities were pondered. Consequently to the quality of the game research field of being relatively young and still not yet established on its own, numerous research methods have been used, since the researchers have been schooled in different disciplines (Lankoski & Björk, 2015, p. 1).

An ideal methodology could have been to observe new players of Overwatch during their first contacts with the game world and then observe their progresses and their reaction to what they are interacting with. However, in the scope of this study, with the means and the time at hand, such a method was unrealistic. For the purpose of this project, the most efficient and realistic methodology was an ethnographical study of Overwatch players through interviews.

Ethnography is considered a good methodology to study virtual worlds or communities, especially since in a lot of cases, the quantitative data can be difficult to access or treat. The anecdotes, impressions, thoughts collected through interviews can be then used for illustrative purposes when crossed with other sets of data or theory (Boellstorff, et al., 2012, pp. 36-41).

With solely interviews, it is not possible to evaluate what players are really thinking or how they actually react to the game. Still, with in-depth interviews, it is possible to get a good idea of what the players say they experience or think they experience. Hopefully, compared with other data about how players actually behave, it may help find out what they really think (Boellstorff, et al., 2012, p. 92). Alternatively, this work will reveal itself useful if it can hint researchers towards hypothesis for future studies.

### 4.2 Presentation of the game

For those who may not be familiar with the world studied here, a section has been added presenting the game, along with annexes completing it with tables and images. This way, the thesis is readable

by itself, and it also allowing some space for an analysis of an important part of the material of study: the game, Overwatch.

Since I am a social scientist and not a ludologist, the analysis focuses on the discourse presented by the game, the players and the culture (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2013, p. 9). On the other hand, it is difficult to analyse the values carried by a game without considering at all the mechanics and the gameplay. As explained in the previous chapter, the game is to be look at as a unified whole. In Flanagan and Nissembaum's *Values at Play in Digital Games*, the authors explain the meaning emerges from the relationship between all elements making a game, from the narrative to the hardware, from the graphic designs to the communication mechanics between the players (Flanagan & Nissembaum, 2014, p. 71). Still, I will not try to analyse the gameplay in detail, as it is not my place. However, when there are connections to make with the mechanics to explain the meaning carried by certain elements of the game, the gameplay will be addressed.

To understand the game, the very first step of the research was, as recommended by Frans Mäyrä, analytic play (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 165). The game was played regularly for some months before starting the interview process. That way, the researcher had a grasp of the game mechanics comparable to which of the interviewees, allowing real conversation with them. The lore of the game world was also read, as well as some reference websites compiling also extra information from in-game observations and interviews from the developers (Gamepedia, 2019).

## 4.3 Interviews

### 4.3.1 Recruitment of the participants

There were not that many options regarding the recruitment of participants for the study, so it became obvious that the best way was to ask an online community on a very active forum concerning Overwatch and hoping to get replies. One of the most active communities sharing about Overwatch is on Reddit, r/Overwatch. It counts about two million of members living all around the world. There are numerous posts everyday seen and commented by online users (Reddit, n.d.).

I wrote to the moderators to make sure that my post would not be considered solicitation, and therefore deleted from the page. After making sure that it was not a paid study offering money to

the participants or that they would not be required to share any personal information, they gave their permission and the post was shared.

Ten candidates replied to the post and two more were found offline through networking. Out of the volunteers found online, six kept giving answers enough so an interview could be organised with them. The contacts were made, according to the wishes of the interviewees, through Reddit or Discord. With the two others found offline, it resulted in the eight interviewees who gave the results presented in this study.

#### 4.3.2 Ethic considerations

Before the interview could take place, an informed consent form was sent to the participants. It was considered an essential step of the process in order to make the interviewees feel like their information would be protected and put only to good use. The consent form contained a reminder of the purpose of the study and how the interview material would be used. It was explained that the video interviews would be recorded for transcription purposes. They were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any point during the interview. It was also confirmed that the participants' real and online identity – real name and used nicknames – would be protected, and therefore that it would not be possible to identify them by reading the thesis (Lankoski & Björk, 2015, p. 2).

As Boellstorff once did, since the contact with most interviewees was solely online, the form was sent to them in the used channel of communication for the video interview, which was either Discord or Skype, and they were asked to send as an answer, in the same chat “I agree to participate to your study” followed by their signature (Cote & Raz, 2015, p. 97). In the one interview that took place offline, the participant signed the paper form.

#### 4.3.3 The interview guide

The writing of the interviews was inspired from the Guide Components found in *Game Research Methods* (Cote & Raz, 2015, p. 104). Following the guide's recommendations, a plan for a “semistructured” interview, as described in *Ethnography and virtual worlds: a handbook of methods* (Boellstorff, et al., 2012, p. 92). Semistructured interviews are an in-between of preparation and flexibility, both being important for interviewing. For in-depth interviews, they

have proved their efficiency as the researcher has a plan indicating themes and topics that are intended to be covered, without being tied to a list of questions, which might be too restrictive to allow a natural flow of conversation with the interviewees (Boellstorff, et al., 2012, p. 92).

Interviews provide a good opportunity to learn about people's representation of their social worlds, beliefs, ideologies, motivations and more, including gamers (Boellstorff, et al., 2012, pp. 92-93). In-depth interviews have proven efficient in collecting gamers' opinions, experiences and more (Cote & Raz, 2015, p. 93). To get the best of the interview methodology, it is important to allow enough time to gain rapport with the interviewees. There must be enough time allocated to explain the purposes of the study and make the participants feel secure about their role in the study (Cote & Raz, 2015, p. 96). Especially in game studies, it is important to take steps to ensure that the interviewees will feel comfortable enough to be able to reveal their thoughts naturally and genuinely. With the moral panic that took place not that many years ago about the media effects from video games (Kirsh, 2010), members of the gaming communities tend to feel wary of researchers. This risk has been considered while planning the interviews in different steps of the process.

The first contact with the interviewees was friendly, without over-politeness. Most of the interviewees having almost the same age as me, the contact went smoothly with all of them. The contact means – Reddit and Discord, mostly – were also familiar to them, which may have helped making them feel at ease. The interviewees' questions before accepting the interview were all welcomed, and the interview time was set according to their preferences.

The first part of the interview was an introductory script that would remind them of the subject of the study, the goals of the interview, and the confidentiality ethics. The script was short, delivered without too much formality in an intent to make sure that the interviewees knew what was happening and get their vocal confirmation that they understood the consent form they signed. They were also encouraged to ask any question they had about those matters at any point.

The introductory script also explained to the interviewees how the interview would go, telling them that it was intended to feel as a conversation; that an interview guide had been written, but contained only themes and introductory questions to introduce those themes; and that the conversation would be let to flow naturally, unless it goes too far off-track, as recommended in

Boellstorff et al. (2012, p. 103). The interview guide was inspired by the guidelines found in *In-depth interviews for games research* by Cote and Raz (2015).

The interview started with the demographics. Although Cote and Raz recommended to end with those, it felt more natural to put them at the start, when the participant and researcher get to know each other, rather than at the end. It was a good choice, in the end, because it allowed the interviews to finish on comments by the interviewees, which were, for some, personal experiences and thoughts that were useful for this study. The demographics were succinct. Their goal was to get to know how the participant identified regarding age, gender, ethnicity, culture, and professional background, without them feeling like it was an invasion of privacy.

Then were asked warm-up questions, easy questions about the participants' gaming background to start building a rapport with them, and also get an idea of the type of gamer they are and their level of game literacy.

Then came the substantive questions. The first questions were easier, making the interviewees recall their first approach to the game and the characters. The questions were written open-ended in order to encourage long answers. Some follow-up questions were prepared for each, in case the interviewee would fall short of ideas as to how to explain themselves.

The themes of the interview were divided in the different characteristics individual are identifying themselves with according to Hall (Hall, 1997(2)) and which of those characteristics were the most used and easiest to observe in Overwatch. For instance, it is to be noted that ethnicity and culture were discussed together, as it is often difficult to separate the topic with people who are not familiar with the literature, and also because they are strongly linked in the game Overwatch. Gender was addressed extensively and with it body types, since those are strongly connected to the characters' gender. Some questions regarding the physical appearance of the character, especially on the topic of sexualization, were inspired from the audiencing methodology proposed by Gillian Rose (2012, p. 30). Then, age and sexual orientation were also discussed. Lastly, questions were planned about the maps, and the conclusion was offering more general reflective questions and opening to any comment the interviewees would like to add.



Some characteristics were not discussed on purpose, because it was considered unlikely that the interviewees would have anything to say about them. Not all social representations are equal: those that have become at some point the object of public concern are much more thought about and discussed. They are further theorized, researched and may cause tensions and provoke actions. In the Gamergate event and in game and media research in general, gender and ethnic representations are more discussed, and through them body types and cultural representation (Stocchetti, 2017, p. 42). The professional background of the characters, for example. When given the occasion, the interviewees did not mention it or very little, so it was mostly not discussed.

#### 4.3.4 The interviews

The interviews took all place online, except one. All of them were recorded with video, except in one case where the interviewee didn't have a camera equipped to their computer. The one interview that took place offline was the first one. It was intended at first to be a pilot interview, a practice in order to see how if the interview guide needed to be modified. Although the guide was slightly modified afterwards, the interview was still fruitful, and it was decided that it would be kept and analysed with the others.

Altogether, the interviews went well. As planned, the longest took 95 minutes. The interviewee was quite talkative and went a lot off-track. It was difficult to bring him back on topic, so some questions had to be skipped because of lack of time. However, it gave place to some very interesting discussion, even if they were not directly about the questions. The shortest interview lasted only 35 minutes. What happened is simply that the interviewee was talking fast and going to the point, so even if the interview was short, all topics were covered. Some questions were also added to the list after the two first interviews because they happened to provoke a very interesting exchange during the third one so they were kept afterwards and asked to the next participants.

During some interviews, questions had to be skipped also with other interviewees because of lack of time, or sometimes lack of interest of the interviewee for the topic. Still, most of the time, the participants were interested and eager to participate. It should be highlighted that with the chosen methodology to select candidates to the interview, it was to be expected that the interviewees would be already interested in the topic and have their own opinion. However, some interviewees confessed not having thought about it much before seeing the post on Reddit and only got

interested at that moment. Consequently, the interviewees had different levels of reflection on the subject.

One interview technique that proved quite efficient with all interviewees was to make them answer as if they were someone with a different identity. Most of the interviewees, when asked about the importance of representation, for example, would give very definitive and personal answers, as it will be shown in the analysis. However, when asking them what they thought other people could answer to the question, their answers were much more in depth.

There was no language problem through all the interviews. All interviewees were at ease expressing themselves in their chosen language and there were almost no communication problems during the interviews.

#### 4.5 The analysis of the answers

In the time and equipment allowed for this study, full transcription of the interview was impractical and partial transcription only was done. Listening to the interviews, the interviews' answers were summarized and only the especially interesting passages were transcribed exactly. The time of key part was written, so when came the time to choose quotes from the interviewees, it was easy to go back in the videos and listen to the extract needed (Boellstorff, et al., 2012, p. 111). The different answers to same questions were compiled and compared and the testimonies specific to some interviewees compiled separately, as it is visible in the analysis which is the next chapter.

## 5 ANALYSIS OF THE PARTICIPANTS' ANSWERS

### 5.1 The interviewees

Through the analysis and the discussion, to ease the reading and understanding of the argument, the interviewees will be named by false first names. Those first names were chosen simply by looking up on Google what are typical first names for somebody of their gender in the region of the world they are from. Eight players of Overwatch were interviewed for this study. Unfortunately, among them is only one woman, called here Ingrid, while all the other interviewees are men. Seven of them were in the age range of 20 to 27 years old, however one of them, called here Wěi, is 43 years-old. They all identify as heterosexual. Most of them were Caucasian, but one of them, Wěi, was Asian and another, called here Adamu, is Black. Most of them are from Europe, but Charles is from North America, Wěi is from South Asia, and Adamu from Sub-Saharan Africa. Another interviewee, here called Karim, has North African origins, but lives in Central Europe.

The interviewees have with different player experiences, while all having. Three of them were already used to play FPSs before starting to play Overwatch, but the others were not. Those players said that they got interested in Overwatch because it had a different style from usual FPSs. All of them said that they were not attracted by the usual military theme and photorealistic style of most other FPSs, but thought that Overwatch looked different and more fun. In fact, four of them mentioned that what brought them to play the game was seeing the characters and the animations and being attracted by the style of the game. Three of them started because of recommendations by friends. The last one, called here Hans, started playing because he was looking for a new competitive game to play after League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009). Two interviewees also mentioned that the resemblance in style to Team Fortress 2 (Valve Corporation, 2007) had made the game quite interesting to them.

The interviewees are also players with different interests. When asked to tell about one of their best playing experience, half of them answered with a story about creating meaningful social connections through gaming; others mentioned stories related to the pride felt when achieving a goal, the thrill offered by new challenges and experiences, or the emotions awoken by a touching story.

While the interviewees have different types of gaming experience, they all told that they had been playing digital games since their childhood, which means that before even starting to play Overwatch, they had already a good level of game literacy and other games as comparison points.

To introduce the educational background of the participants: six of them have done some university level studies. Ingrid and Lars both only have a High School diploma. It might be relevant to specify that Matti and Charles have both been studying and working already in the field of video games.

Finally, all the interviewees had started playing Overwatch at least a year before the interview took place and had a solid game experience. They were all knowledgeable about the game and the related lore. Although questioning beginner players with fresh experiences could have been interesting, in the scope of this study, with only eight interviewees, having all of them with a comparable amount of game experience allows more meaningful comparisons between them.

## 5.2 First approach to the characters

As firsts questions that were ask from the players about their Overwatch experience was requiring from them to recall how they reacted the first time they started playing the game. How did they react to the character roster? Which hero did they try first? Why?

Most of the interviewees actually chose their first character according to the abilities, choosing a gameplay already familiar to them or easy to learn. The three of them who already had experience plying shooter games started with Soldier:76, a character with abilities and a playstyle familiar to those who played games like Call of Duty (Activision, 2003). Another started also with Soldier:76 because of his simple and straightforward toolkit. Adamu, for similar reasons, started with Torbjörn, because he was using a character with similar abilities in League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009), thus the gameplay was more natural to him.

Other reasons mentioned for choosing a first character were related to appearance or style. Mercy, for instance, was attractive as first character to Karim and Ingrid because of her design, very different from usual FPS characters. Matti, on the other hand, was interested at first by Genji and Hanzo because those characters are from Japan and he is interested in Japanese culture. So, the

cultural attachment – to one’s own culture or another – can also be a reason to choose a character, along with the familiarity of the gameplay, and the visual design.

The interviewees were then asked to recall which characters they liked at first and which they didn’t. Matti talked about how he liked the design of characters like Genji and Zenyatta. He said thinking that, because they are human shaped, but still look robot-like, they can be easier to identify to because they don’t show any ethnicity or other usually defining characteristics.

However, those particularities can also repel other players. Ingrid, for example, disliked Zenyatta’s design at the start precisely for that reason. She thought that he didn’t show any personality and had difficulties imagine herself identifying to it and enjoying playing the character.

While some interviewees didn't have any strong feelings towards the visual design of the characters, Ingrid was not the only one to dislike some of them. Charles, for example, wasn’t interested by Junkrat at first, because he thought that the character looked too “fantastic” or “unrealistic” with his hair on fire. As for Matti, he didn’t like Widowmaker because he saw her design as coming from the culture of sexualization of women in the game industry. Two other interviewees mentioned also not liking at first Zarya because she looks too masculine for a female character.

Then, the interviewees were asked about the backstories. All the interviewees except Charles were very knowledgeable about the Overwatch lore and the characters’ backstories. They all have different favourite and disliked stories, although two of them mentioned liking a lot Ana’s. However, they all agreed that the backstories can change the perception one has of a character and allows players to relate more easily to them. All of those interviewees complained that Blizzard was releasing too slowly the backstories and that they would love to have a lot more information about the lore.

### 5.3 Choice of a *main*

Overwatch’s game mechanics do in sort that players will be able to change character more than once during a single match, which might allow them to adapt to different situations. However, most players find it ultimately more rewarding to specialize in one character in order to become very skilled at that specific playstyle and using those specific abilities. The chosen character is

then called the player's *main*, as in "main character". A player who has a main will play the character almost exclusively and can cumulate hundreds of hours of play with it.

Six of the interviewees said having a main. When asked how they chose it, they all said that it was solely according to the gameplay. Although they all said liking also other parts of the character's design. Perhaps, as Matti said, when one finds a character that matches their playstyle, they get to like the character more.

#### 5.4 Thoughts on the inclusivity intend in Overwatch

Most of the interviewees had not heard about Blizzard's inclusivity intend in the design of Overwatch before being in contact with me. However, most of them were not surprised to learn about it. Karim said that he could see the efforts already in the animated shorts. Matti too thought it was evident by looking at the game and noticing how the characters are different and how the design does in sort to make the cultural identity and other differences "cool aspects of the characters."

As the subject of study here is the potential effects Blizzard's efforts in design can have on the players, most of the interviews' time was spent talking about the chosen facets of the characters' identity and how the interviewees reacted to those.

##### 5.4.1 Inclusiveness of ethnicities in different game genres

To the question "Is it important for games to be inclusive of different ethnicities and cultures?", only one interviewee answered that it was not. Different reasons are given for which it is important. Two interviews said straightforwardly that it feels good to see some variety offered in the type of characters and settings offered in video games. They think that it is too bad that a lot of possible settings for video games remain still unexplored, while there are so many interesting places in the world. Two others said that in a game like Overwatch, where the story is about the future of Earth, having characters from different parts of the world is very important in order to have a rich story. They said that it is because there are characters from different regions that it is possible to learn about the lore of those places. Without those heroes, it would be more difficult for the game to offer a rich background story. Matti thinks it is important because not all people who might want

to play Overwatch are Caucasian or coming from America, so the characters should be reflective of that diversity.

However, half of the interviewees nuanced their answer. If they think that a game like Overwatch, which is setting an international taskforce on future Earth, should feature characters from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, they don't think that all games should absolutely have characters diverse in that sense. Karim, for instance, explained that it is indeed important in Overwatch, but that it is also interesting sometimes to play games that are specifically about one ethnicity or culture or even where there is no ethnicity, culture or religion.

Wěi thinks that while it is a good thing that Blizzard offers characters with different backgrounds, they do it simply as a part of their business plan. For him, it is a good way to sell a game, make people from all around the world wanting to try the game because there is a character representing their region. He said that especially a game like Overwatch, that is aspiring to become an important international esport, must get numerous people to play it at a high level and be interested in it. He adds that if all the characters of a game are the same, for example if they are all White, some potentially talented players who are not White might think the game is not for them. "So, how you get people to play your game, it's to get as much people around the world possible to try out the game [...] And the only way to do it is to use diversity."

The one that answered that having characters from different ethnic and cultural background in games was definitely not important was Lars. For Lars, it is important only if the designers want it to be important. He thinks that it doesn't matter at all for the players which ethnicity their character has, because once they play, they forget about their character identity to only immerse themselves in the game. For him, when the player immerses themselves in the game, the identity of the avatar disappears and the only thing that matters is the gameplay. He gives the example of the games series Arma (Bohemia Interactive, 2003-) and Battlefield (EA DICE, 2002-), which he plays, saying that no matter where the character is from, "no one cares, we are all just soldiers." However, he insisted that it should be considered important in the case where the game is meant to be historically accurate. Then, he said, the game should present only characters with plausible cultural and ethnic background: "I would say that it's very important to keep it as true as possible. You can't exactly lie about the representation. The worst thing you can do is to lie about racism

and the segregation that happened at that time.” For example, purposes, he explains that if there was an historical game about the Second World War featuring Black soldiers on the front lines, it would be inaccurate and harmful, because it is a lie about the racism that existed at the time.

Still, when asked their opinion about how other people than them feel about representation, perhaps people from cultural or ethnic minority groups, the interviewees could very well imagine why it would make them glad to be represented. Adamu compared it to seeing his country represented in the Olympics, telling it can make people feel some sense of pride of who they are, especially children. Ingrid related the question to her own experience, explaining that because she is blond, she relates to Mercy, a character who is also a blond woman, and that she could understand that other people would probably also relate better to characters who look like them. Matti also claimed to relate since he gets happy whenever someone mentions of his own country: “it’s nice to see game developers being aware that players also exist in that country.”

When asked if they felt represented or misrepresented in Overwatch, all interviewees stated that they didn’t feel left out, even though Hans is the only one sharing his country of origin with one of the characters. All the interviewees answered that although it would be interesting to have a character or a map from their country, it was not essential since they did not feel left out because they could perfectly imagine it happening in the future.

None of the interviewees neither felt that there was any issue with the way different cultures are depicted in Overwatch. In the conversation with them, the concepts of stereotypes and cultural appropriation were introduced. None of them saw the stereotypes used in Overwatch as offensive. Wěi talked about Mei, the character to which he feels culturally close, claiming that he was quite happy to have his culture represented by her. Hans actually found himself enjoying seeing the use of stereotypes associated to his country, Germany, used in the design of Reinhardt. Mentioning the stereotypes of a tall person with a massive medieval armor speaking quite loudly, he added that “it’s great, it gives flavor.”

None of the interviewees detected cultural appropriation problems, except when some skins were attributed to characters with which the cultural connection was not clear in the game. For example, the appropriateness of Pharah’s skins inspired by Native American’s culture was questioned, since the character is presented as Egyptian in the game. Although it is confirmed that her father is



Canadian (Chu, 2017), it is unclear whether he is or not a member of the First Nations. However, even interviewees questioning the idea of giving that skin to the character didn't think it was a major issue since the design, in their opinion, was made very respectfully and did not demean the culture in any way.



Figure 5.1 Pharah in her Raindancer and Thunderbird skins, both inspired from Amerindian cultures.

In a general manner, the interviewees were quite appreciative of the cultural and ethnic inclusiveness of Overwatch, saying that it was done thoughtfully, was enriching the game, and made them all feel welcomed to try and play it.

#### 5.4.2 Openness towards different genders

When asked if they thought that it is important for games to be inclusive of different genders, three participants replied that it was and five that it was not. All five who argued that the gender of game characters didn't have any importance maintained that when they play a game, playing a character of a different gender doesn't bother them at all, and that the character's gender is not, or rather should not be an obstacle for anybody to play a game. They all defended their point of view referring to their own personal experience: since the gender of the characters doesn't prevent them for enjoying the game, it should be the same for everybody else. The gender of the character should

be left at the discretion of the creators who will design the characters according to the game's setting and story.

Charles, even though he replied that the gender of the characters mattered, could relate with that argumentation. He told that if the question had been asked to him about three years before, he would have answered that the characters' gender did not matter and that designers should not worry about having a balanced offer of male and female characters. Then, in the last years, he learned more about media representation and think that there should be more gender balance in the games precisely to make the point that gender doesn't matter. However, he nuances his argument by distinguishing a game with a more creative setting like *Overwatch* from historical games, where the wish for accuracy might limit the possibilities for having a gender balance within the characters.

Adamu and Matti, on the other hand, talked straight away about representation, stating that having a gender balance within the available characters is important, simply because the players are not all males. As Matti puts it this way: "Well, half of the players are female, in video games in general, so [...] it doesn't make sense to limit the players only to male characters. It's both not really representative of the players and not representative of the developers neither." Adamu adds that for him, it is the same issue as including people of color. With games presenting mostly White male characters, players that are not part of that group get use to play a character very different from themselves, and still, feeling represented in the game is "better all the way."

Lars was the most categorically opposed to the idea of giving any sort of importance to the gender of any game characters. He repeated that the characters' gender – or identity, for that matter – doesn't change anything for the players. That the only things that makes a player interested in a game are not including the identification to the character, but rather that they are simply a good gameplay and a good story. He maintained that the only time game developers should be concerned with the gender – or, more simply, the identity of their characters – is when creating an historical game that is meant to show accurately how was the world in that time and place of the game's setting. To support his argument, he wanted to talk about the game *Battlefield V* (EA DICE, 2018), which features the events of the heavy water sabotage that happened in Norway during the Second World War. However, in the game, the sabotage is pictured as done by two women, while according to the historical facts, it was an operation realised by a team of six men. For Lars, that

design choice is an aberration as a game cannot claim to be historical and tell about real events while modifying history so radically: “The worst thing you can do is to lie about what happened just to fit an agenda or to appeal to someone else. [...] But many people suspected that they did it to appeal to feminism, and I think that’s really bad that if you would go so far as to change history just to appeal to a vocal minority that demands to be represented.” He concludes by regretting that if they wanted to feature female soldiers, they could have done it while remaining historically accurate by going on the Russian side, for example, where there actually were women tank drivers, pilots and snipers.

Ingrid, who was disagreeing with the statement that the characters’ gender was important, had however an interesting reflection when thinking about her own experiences as a gamer. She realized, during the interview, that although she claimed that gender representation doesn’t matter in games, almost all the characters she usually plays are female. She concludes that it is probably unconscious, but that she actually may relate more to female characters than male ones.

Hans, however, gave a more nuanced answer to the question, saying that the gender of the character “doesn’t matter as long as it fits the game.” When asked to explain his point of view, he proceeded to explain that female characters don’t fit certain context, in a horror game setting for example: “I mean, there are some games, which are maybe rather brutal, and then there are mostly only male characters that are present. I think, it that regards, it’s more... it fits better. If you have a very brutal environment, it’s more unrealistic to have a female character that would be implemented.” He told imagining that in a horror context, while it is natural to imagine a male character keep his calm and face his fears, what would be the expected reaction for a female character would be rather her screaming and panicking. However, when asked if he thinks that his difficulties imagining a female character in that kind of context might come from not having seen it before, Hans started thinking: “Maybe, that could have a great impact, actually. [...] Now, we are trying to equal what men and women can do, which is a good thing, but there has been in our minds for such a long time that men have certain roles and female have certain roles... it’s something that’s hard to get out of our minds.”

All the interviewees could imagine why some people are happy about the gender balance in Overwatch or other games. Karim, who was arguing that the characters’ gender didn’t matter,

could also imagine that if he were a woman, he would most likely be glad about it, since historically, most of game characters are male. Wěi could also understand why some female players would be glad about it, since “in a way, it is an acknowledgement of their existence.” Matti confessed that he was hoping that if female characters were more commonly seen, the characters’ gender might attract less attention, and therefore the players’ gender too.

The interviewees also acknowledged that there were probably players choosing their character according to gender, even though all of them made sure to say that it was not their case. They all answered that they heard some people claiming that they could not relate to a character with a different gender than themselves, without however relating to that feeling. In conclusion, they all thought that Blizzard was, to quote Lars, “doing pretty damn well” regarding gender inclusiveness in Overwatch.

#### *5.4.2.1 Body types*

From the topic of gender, the conversation with the interviewees was brought onto the characters’ body types, starting with the female characters. All the interviewees seemed skeptical about the offered variety. They all noticed that Zarya is different, with her body-builder musculature. But beside her, they all stated that the other female characters all had the stereotypical “Siamese cat-like body shape”, as Wěi puts it. Some of the interviewees mentioned also Mei, who is supposed to be rounder and therefore have a different body shape; on the other hand, they also wondered if it was not only due to her wearing a thick winter attire.

Part of the interviewees stated that the design choice was simply because female characters with the “ideal body type”, as Ingrid said, are more attractive for the players. Hans claimed that it was “something to lure the audience with.” On the other hand, when wondering about adding, for example, an overweight female character, he hypothesised that people would probably not like it “because of social norms.” The fact that Ingrid and Lars admitted disliking Zarya at the start because of her unconventional design for a female character confirms that impression.

On the male characters’ side, the interviewees were more appreciative of the offered variety in body shape. They named Roadhog, Zenyatta, and Reinhardt as exceptions. Lars added that the male side has “a gorilla and a hamster and even some robots, so that’s some good diversity!”

However, most of them did notice once again that most of Overwatch's heroes subscribe to the typical V-shape body type of video game characters. Karim even associate the stereotypical aggressive FPS gameplay to characters designed that way, explaining that it is the reason he is not attracted to those characters: he associates them to a gameplay that he doesn't like.

Some interviewees had their own point of view over the design choice of having heroes looking alike in video games. Lars stated that it was normal for the characters to be thin and in good shape, because they all come from military background. Wěi explained that it was because the characters are meant to be heroes and therefore are "representations of the best of their culture in physical form [which is why] you see the female hourglass shape and the male V-shape, because it's the best physical ideal."

Although some interviewees still thought that Overwatch could do better, they had difficulties pointing out what was missing. Adamu made the interesting point that, although the "extremes" present in Overwatch made sense – "the regular buff guy, the huge one and the small ones – it would be interesting to see something more normal, like a character with a "dad bod."

In conclusion regarding the characters' body types, the interviewees had mixed feelings towards them. On the female side, the general agreement is that there is very little inclusivity, and that while there is more variety on the male side, most interviewees think that there could be more.

#### 5.4.2.2 Sexualization

In some interviews, while discussing about the characters' body types, the topic of sexualization came up. Each time it was brought up, one character was mentioned by the interviewees: Widowmaker. Although none of them were playing the character a lot, consequently most likely not having any special attachment to her, their reactions to the character design are very distinctive.



Figure 5.2 The Kerrigan skin used by Matti (Gamepedia, 2018)

Charles, who didn't really like the design, defined the character as the "stereotype of the sexy widow." Matti questions the necessity of having a character sexualised this way in the game. He told that, from the start, even though he was interested by Widowmaker's gameplay, he didn't want to try the character because her design comes from the culture of sexualising women in the game industry and he didn't want to appear as supporting it. Now, when he happens to play the character, he only uses one of the skins that "make her look like a normal character." Both interviewees disapproved the sleekness of the suit, which brings attention towards the character's generous curves, and the cleavage.

However, not all the interviewees shared that point of view. As a matter of fact, more interviewees were defending Widowmaker's design. Ingrid, for instance, doesn't think that Widowmaker's sexualisation is overdone, so it doesn't bother her at all. She confessed liking the character's design a lot. For Adamu, Widowmaker's design is not out of place since it is used to show the character's personality. In the same vein of idea, Lars states that Widowmaker's clothing shows that she is a "sleek and elegant woman." He defended also that the cleavage is a choice of what the person or character were when going to battle. Adamu also comments that he doesn't see the cleavage as an issue, since it is not visible during the game for the player and should not be neither by the teammates or opponents, since Widowmaker is a sniper and should therefore be hidden.

Altogether, the different points of view over the sexualisation of the character Widowmaker were interestingly conflicting. They will be addressed further in the discussion.

#### 5.4.3 Difference of age and story-telling

Again, the interviewees were asked about the importance of inclusiveness, this time concerning the different age groups players might belong to. Due to time restrictions during the interview, the topic of age inclusiveness was not discussed with two of the interviewees. Of the six from whom it was asked if it is important for a game to feature characters of different ages, three answered categorically that it was important. Adamu maintained that it was important because seeing people of their age pictured as heroes allows people to feel pride about who they are currently, at this stage of their lives. Wěi went for a more practical approach, claiming that it is important in order to be able to tell a compelling story with diverse relationships between the characters. The other interviewees were more uncertain in their answer, saying mostly that it is already not that

uncommon to have characters of different ages in video games, because it would be difficult to write an interesting story otherwise. No interviewee have as an opinion that the age of the character is a choosing criteria for any player.

An interesting comment came from Charles, who commented that Ana, even though she should be 60 years old, doesn't look like it from his perspective. He thinks it's a flaw in the design, because if people who are about 60 years old look at the character and can't recognize that she has the same age as them, the point is missed. However, he acknowledged that Reinhardt looks more like his age.

To summarize, the interviewees had little to say about the inclusiveness in the age of the characters. Most of them had not thought about it being important before. Although they all agreed that variety in age of the characters is one of the ingredients for a more compelling story.

#### 5.4.4 Importance of including different sexual orientations

The last question concerning directly the identity of the characters was about the sexual orientation. The participants were asked to express if they thought it was important for games to be inclusive of different sexual orientations.

Once again, because of lack of time during some of the interviews, this topic was not brought in the conversation with all interviews. It was only discussed with five of them. However, interestingly, all the interviewees questioned on the topic said that it would be indeed important for video games to be inclusive of people of other sexual orientation than heterosexual. The reasons given to justify the opinion were all about how it might be important for people part of the LGBT+ community, that it might make them feel included or acknowledged.

To conclude about the characters: depending of which aspect of inclusiveness was discussed, the interviewees had different opinions and thoughts about it. There were especially divided opinions regarding the importance of inclusiveness in the characters' genders and on the matter of sexualization. The opinions were more homogenous regarding the importance of inclusiveness of different cultures and ethnicities, body type, and sexual orientation. The interviewees mostly didn't have a strong opinion about the matter of age inclusivity. These will be further analysed in the discussion.



## 5.5 Maps

The variety of locations offered by the different playable maps was also discussed with the interviewees. They agreed that in *Overwatch*, it was important to have maps from several different locations. Their point was mostly that *Overwatch* setting, which is an international task force operating around the globe, it would not make sense to have all the maps belong to a same area. Also, they mentioned that such a game could not claim to be inclusive without doing so; or, as Lars put it, “it’s important if they want to reach their representation quota.” As for the characters, they all stated that the different countries were well depicted by the design of the maps and that it would be quite interesting to have a map from their area, if it is not already the case.

When asking the interviewees about their reactions to the different maps, the one that was mentioned as a surprise was Numbani. In the *Overwatch* lore, Numbani is a city in Africa that was founded after the Omnic war and meant to be a place where Omnics and Humans would live in peace. It became quickly one of the most technologically advanced city in the world: modern, thriving, clean, with tall and graceful skyscrapers. The city is said to be set somewhere around the area that is today Nigeria.



*Figure 5.3 “Travelling to Numbani” (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)*



When talking about Numbani, all interviewees shared how, when they first saw the map, they were surprised by Blizzard's choice to set such a technologically advanced and wealthy city in West Africa. They didn't expect it, because it is not something they see as realistic according to what they know of the state of Africa nowadays. Most of the interviews seemed indeed to have an image of West Africa as a really poor place without big cities. Hans even squarely said that, in that part of Africa, "there is nothing." Only Wěi was deploring the fact that people outside of Africa often think about it as a poor, empty place, while the region actually has a rich history, for example when Nigeria was in the Kingdom of Aksum.

Most of the interviewees however expressed that they saw Blizzard's design of the futuristic African map as a message of hope, showing what Africa could look like in a bright future. Karim mentioned that it was a good choice in order to be inclusive of African players without stigmatising them with victimhood and poverty. Only Lars was cynical about the matter, qualifying the design of Numbani as a "pretty ironic decision" from Blizzard.

Altogether, the participants were surprised by the design of Numbani, but appreciated it. They are also very appreciative of the other maps and their variety.

## 5.6 Media effect

At the conclusion of the interview, the interviewees were asked directly about the potential effects a game like Overwatch could have on its players.

### 5.6.1 Importance of inclusiveness in game design

The first question of the last part of the interview was asking the participants if they thought that inclusiveness in game design was something that creators should give importance to. Three participants answered positively to the question. The others were more ambiguous. Adamu, one of the most categorical on the topic, explained that it is important that different people have opportunities to relate to characters not only in games, but also in movies and other media.

Among the other group, Karim was more partisan to let the creators freedom to express themselves. He specified that unless they have a racist point of view that needs to be questioned, they should be let to do as they see fit for their game. Wěi thinks somehow the same way, telling that some games

are more personal for the creators, and some are meant for a more general audience. If the developers should be inclusive if they intend their game to be played around the world, they are also allowed, if they want, to make game about only a specific culture or ethnic group.

Matti is also worried that the developers might feel pressured to be very inclusive in their designs in every game they make by fear of backlash. Ingrid thinks the same way, arguing that game developers should not feel pressured to add for example female characters only to fill a quota, because when it happens it usually feels unnatural. Ingrid is also afraid that the game developers might be afraid of making mistake if they attempt to be inclusive of different cultures or genders in their game. She stated that the creator should not be afraid to experiment, and that people should “stop seeing everything as a potential offense.” She gave the schism around Battlefield V (EA DICE, 2018) as an example of players being uselessly offended by the creators adding female characters.

Lars’s argument was in line with his other answer, stating that developers should be careful about the identity of their characters only in the case where they tell a true story. For him, changing the identity of characters in historical events “just to fill representation quotas” is a “perversion of history.” He still added that if the game is about fictional events, the creators should be able to put whoever they want.

The interviewees have indeed different points of view and worries regarding the inclusiveness of games and the creator freedom. The underlying argument in most conversations was an acknowledgement that inclusiveness in games is good, but that the developers should not be pressured to include everyone in every single game.

### 5.6.2 General effect of inclusive design on players

The interviewees were asked if they thought that, generally, inclusiveness in games could have any effects on the players. The participants were divided on this question: two said that no, they don’t think it can have any effect; three said that maybe it can have effects; and three others were positive that there would be impacts on the players.

From the two who answered a definitive no, Hans was simply not believing that it was possible, stating that the only potential effect a game can have on the player is bringing enjoyment from

playing the game. The other was Lars, who maintains that players don't care about inclusiveness in video games. He added that there were inclusive games already in 2003 and that it is nothing new. For him, the only thing that changed is that people are talking about it more than before: "It has become a bigger issue because we *think* it is the issue."

Charles was more unsure about the possibility. Still, he mentioned that in his case, the game made him wonder about his real-life relationship. Seeing the characters from different origins in the game working together made him wonder about why he doesn't have Asian or African friends. Is it because he didn't have the opportunity, or because of unconscious prejudices? It made him do some self-reflection, though he doesn't think that it changed him in any way.

Among those who were unsure, Ingrid wondered about the possibility that some people might learn, through the game, to love something towards which they were intolerant before. She told that she noticed that some people are intolerant towards some characters, especially Zarya, because of her looks. She has even heard some homophobic and transphobic slur toward the character. However, she recalls that herself did not like the character at the start because of what she looked like, but that she learned to love her and that other players might change their attitude too and get used to the way she looks.

Karim too thinks that there might be chances that it allows some people to get used to see different kind of people. However, he also fears that making people have to play along characters whose culture they don't approve of might make some people dislike even more those differences. He gave as an example some conversations he saw on forums concerning the character Pharah. He remembers that some participants in the forum were offended by the presence of an Arab in the game. He believes that it is unlikely that seeing the character in the game had a positive effect on those players.

Then, there is Adamu who was positive that seeing different kinds of people in the game would make the players used to see those differences around them and most likely make them more tolerant. Matti was also partisan of that point of view, adding that the fact that the developers acknowledge people of those groups by putting a character like them in the game sends a very positive message. Wěi was also answering yes to the question. Although he was sharing Karim's worries that it could worsen the situation with people who don't want to see some kinds of people

around themselves, he was especially enthusiastic about the potential educative effects: “One example that I can think of is that people get to learn about other cultures, other parts of the world they might not know. For example, Tracer has lion dance. I’m sure there are some White people who had never seen a lion dance before. To see a piece of it like that they might think ‘oh, that’s interesting!’. Hopefully, maybe they go Google what is a lion dance and they get to find out more why the Chinese celebrate the Chinese New Year with Lion dance.”

Then, while the interview was at its end, the participants were told that there are actually some studies done on other media, like inclusive TV shows, that showed that viewers would be influenced by the media in their views of people from minority; that the people would be more tolerant of some difference and more prone to accept people with different culture or sexuality, for example, as part of their community.

### 5.6.3 Comparison with previous media effect studies

Towards the very end of the interview, after having already told if they believed that inclusiveness in games could have an effect on the players’ openness to differences, the participants were then told about the existence of previous studies on the same topic, only on TV programs. They were told that some of those studies showed positive results, then asked if they thought that video games could cause the same effect on players as those TV programs did on their viewers.

Hans changed his answer straight away, saying that if TV shows can have that effect, then games definitely can too, since many players play them every day. Ingrid was also convinced. Wěi and Karim claimed that games should even have a greater effect than passive media, since they allow players to really immerse themselves in the game world.

Lars didn’t change his answer, maintaining that inclusiveness in video games doesn’t matter to the players since “They are way more focused on the gameplay. They don’t care about diversity at all. Because diversity is not what makes a game good. Good gameplay and good stories is what makes us play the game.”

Hearing about those previous studies, Adamu opened up about his own experiences with learning through media, giving place to a whole testimony:

*Adamu: “Growing up, I remember, when I was a lot younger, I remember asking my mom: ‘Mom, what does ‘gay’ mean?’ And my mom is a very, very religious person and so she told me ‘Where did you hear that?’ and then she told me basically ‘Don’t worry about it’. And so later on, I found out through media – probably 100% through TV – I found out what it was. You know, as time goes on, media would be more open to it and so now I’m seeing it more frequently and so it really became an idea to me that was like... you know, people can do whatever they want with their lives as long as they are not hurting anybody.”*

*Me: “And so, do you think video games can have the same impact by exposing people to different things?”*

*Adamu: “Yeah. Before I started playing Overwatch, honestly, before I found out that Tracer was gay, I’d known gay people in my life and none of them had been particularly nice to me, growing up. But I didn’t think any less of them because they were gay, it’s just, like, those were the only gay people that I knew and they were not very nice. So, seeing more gay people that are actually friendly... Because in GTA (Grand Theft Auto, Rockstar North, 1997), I remember seeing some bisexual characters, some straight up gay characters and they portrayed them in a much funnier way. Then, the people I met in real life... yeah, I ended up meeting more gay people in real life and they were nice people. And so it was all what was around my life. I was trying to be more open, be more inclusive, but I was still sort of hung up on what my mother told me just a bit. And then, you know, a bit more media just broke me through it.”*

## 5.7 Summary of the analysis

The conclusive comments by the interviewees were mostly appreciating the efforts made by Blizzard to create a game that would make as many people as possible feel welcomed to play. Ingrid added also that in her experience, the game has a minimal level of toxicity for an online competitive game. She told that her being a female player, she was worried that she would have problems of sexism from some players, but that it only happened twice. She recalls that both times, the other players in the game defended her.

As a closing comment, Lars wanted to express his views of the current criticism toward the inclusiveness of some games. He thinks that some games that are meant to represent or express something are getting criticized for it while they should not.

*Lars: “For example, the game The Witcher 3 (CD Projekt, 2015). The Witcher 3 is a polish-made game created by polish people who wanted to express their polish culture. The game was criticised for its lack of diversity. Many people scratched their heads, including me. We wondered: what was the lack of diversity from? We saw a lot of diversity in that game: we saw dwarves, we saw elves, we saw mutants, and we saw monsters of all kinds! But it turned out the only diversity they cared about was the diversity of skin colour. And I think: why is that so important? Why is skin color so important? And why is skin colour the only representation of the diversity? [...] Not a single character in Overwatch has a background story or an ethnicity that fits me. I don’t see a single person. But to me, it doesn’t really matter. I don’t need to see myself in the game in order to be able to enjoy it. I just need the gameplay.”*

These discussions concluded the interviews. The next section will be analysing further the answers obtained from the participants, discussing them in comparison with the previously presented theory.

## 6 DISCUSSION

This chapter will review the results of the previously presented analysis in comparison with the theory, to answer the research question: How are players reflecting on and reacting to developers' attempt at inclusive design of the video game Overwatch?

### 6.1 The sample

The sample of players, although small, served well the purpose of this research. The participants were of different ages, cultures, and ethnicities, so some of them were part of minorities represented in Overwatch and others not. They were from different backgrounds and had different gaming experiences and interests. However, they were all experimented players in general, therefore had a good game literacy, and all of them were experimented players of Overwatch. Although it would have been interesting to interview beginner players to observe their first contact with the world and characters of Overwatch, in the end, it was probably more beneficial to have players with a comparable level of experience. Since the sample is relatively small, having all players who have been playing the game for at least a year made their experiences more easily comparable in the results' analysis.

### 6.2 The players' congratulations to Blizzard

Altogether, the interviewees were recognizing Blizzard's efforts in making the game inclusive. The interviewees were unanimously satisfied with the ethnic and gender inclusivity in the design of the playable characters. None of them detected neither issues in the way the different genders or cultures were represented, saying that Blizzard was designing the characters carefully and respectfully to those different identities. The only substantial criticism was address to the design of the character Widowmaker, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The participants were also appreciative of the different maps available and the inclusion of a LGBT+ character.

Where criticism aroused was regarding the different body types represented among the hero casting, especially on the female side. The interviewees were wondering why there was almost no diversity on the female side. Some asked why there would not be, for example, an obese female character if there is a male one. Hans hypothesised that it would not be accepted socially, citing

the witnessed rejection against the design of the character Zarya, which doesn't subscribe to traditional femininity standards. Maybe Hans is right: if Zarya, a strong woman, provoked strong reactions among players, it is probable that an obese female character would cause a backlash (Nikunen, 2013), which is the opposite of the desired reaction in inclusive design. However, it was interesting to hear the participants wonder about the possibility and saying that they would be open to see such a character in the future.

Most of the participants, also, were able to imagine why the inclusivity was beneficial for players belonging to the represented minority groups, which is why most of them expressed that they were glad to see an important game company like Blizzard be so inclusive.

### 6.2.1 Low level of toxicity

Something interesting that was noticeable through the interviews was the overall low level of toxicity in Overwatch reported by the participants. Only one interviewee told having witnessed personal attacks towards a player. However, more than one talked about hearing homophobic or transphobic slur against the character Zarya – one interviewee even used such language to describe the character during the interview. This was one of the most important contrasts between the interviewees: some wondering why there wouldn't be an obese female character, and those being open about having difficulties liking Zarya because of her body type.

The difficulties some players feel towards Zarya might be possible to explain through Hall's theory of stereotypes. Culturally, femininity has been associated with feelings and softness, while masculinity, as its binary opposite, is associated with hardness, competitiveness and strength (Hall, 1997(2), pp. 296-319). However, Zarya being a female character who is also a strong bodybuilder, she doesn't fit in any of those two categories. For some people, a person like Zarya might be a foreign concept and their inability to make her fit in their classification system is threatening the system itself (Hall, 1997(1)). Some players, like Ingrid, learned however to get used to the character and even like it. This is pure speculation, but, perhaps, doing so, those players create a new category in their own classification system that accept people not fitting into gender stereotypes. Perhaps it really creates openness.



### 6.2.2 Delivering a message of openness

While talking about the design process of Overwatch, Jeff Kaplan explained that the intention was “inclusivity and open mindedness.” (Kaplan, 2017). It seems that the goal was reached: even though most interviewees had not heard about that intend in the game design, most of them confirmed that they had noticed it from the character design, much more varied than usual for FPS games, and the game narrative, which is about people from around the globe working together.

## 6.3 Learned unimportance of identity

According to Passmore and Mandryk’s paper, presented in the second chapter, the grouping expressing the greatest needs for more representation in video games were the Black ones, while the ones expressing the most indifference towards it were White ones. The hypothesis was that it was because those groups presented the more and the less need for better representation (Passmore & Mandryk, 2018, p. 371).

### 6.3.1 “It doesn’t really matter...”

The results of the interviews done in this study were not clearly reflecting that observation. If comparing the answers of Adamu and Lars could give that impression, it is to be noticed that most of the interviewees were White and still giving different answers regarding the questions about inclusiveness, most of them agreeing that a good representation of different ethnicities was important. Charles even explained that it was brought to his attention by the awareness raising campaigns seen in the last years.

However, most of the interviewees were defending strongly that seeing a representation of their own identity in video games was not important to them, personally. Even Ingrid was arguing that, while she appreciates being able to play a female character, she doesn’t mind if it is not possible. So, while the interviewees were in majority aware of the importance it can have for others, they had learned to not care about it for themselves.

Adamu was the only one not agreeing with that. He explained, in his own words, that he was actually aware that he had to learn to not care. That as a person of colour, he had to learn to get used to play a character that doesn’t look like him, that he learned to not mind, like theorized by

Passmore and Mandryk (2018). However, he still thinks it is better when there is the possibility of choosing.

What also hints towards the unlearned care about self-representation is the fact that more than one participant realized during the interview that their point of view was not exactly reflecting what they observed around themselves. For example, Ingrid, who claimed that the gender of the characters did not matter to her, realised afterwards that almost all the characters she was playing were female, and that given the choice, she would always choose to play the female characters. Also, Hans was assuming that self-representation through the avatar mattered more to female players, because he gets the impression that every female player he encounters is has a female character as a main. However, when asked about it, he realizes that, actually, all male players he knows he can think of also main male characters. Therefore, he was assuming that only others, female others here, cared, and not people like him, while the situation is not as clear.

Not all social representations are equal: those that have become at some point the object of public concern are much more thought about and discussed. They are further theorized, researched and may cause tensions and provoke actions (Stocchetti, 2017, p. 42). In the Gamergate event and in game and media research in general, gender and ethnic representations are more discussed, and through them body types and cultural representation, which means that players are more aware of those issues. It reflected in the conversation with the interviewees, who had already made opinions about those questions and more to tell about them.

Background representation was also not talked about much in the interview, although it was mentioned by Lars in his closing comment: “Not a single character in Overwatch has a background story or an ethnicity that fits me. I don’t see a single person. But to me, it doesn’t really matter. I don’t need to see myself in the game in order to be able to enjoy it. I just need the gameplay.” While this shows an abstraction of the fact, as a White male, Lars is part of the group most represented in video games, the comment also demonstrate how the background – socio-economical, professional or else – is indeed something that is part of people’s identity and could be better represented in video games.

This also explains why the conversations would most often cut short concerning other aspect of identity, especially age representation. The interviewees were often surprised by the question about

age and didn't have a strong opinion on the matter, unlike when talking about skin colour or gender. When expressing a need for different age groups among video game characters, the interviewees were mostly justifying their opinion by explaining that it makes more sense for the storytelling and creating meaningful relationship between the characters, family ties for example. However, all interviewees thought that Overwatch was offering good representation for different age groups.

### 6.3.2 "...as long as it fits the game."

Even though most interviewees were affirmative that the identity of the character doesn't matter to them, a will was still present to protect certain aspects of the gaming culture attached to the typical identity of characters in certain games. Hans and Lars, two interviewees adamant that the identity of the characters does not affect their ability to enjoy a game, both nuanced their affirmation when talking about other games than Overwatch.

As explained in the previous chapter, while Hans was saying being open to gender equality and playing female characters, he was quite skeptical about the viability of a female character as a hero of a horror game, for instance. He could not imagine how a female character could be designed to seem like she belongs in such a role and environment. What Hans was explaining is that for him, a female that would be strong enough and careless enough of her appearance to fit in a ruthless setting would not be appearing as female anymore; the character would not fit in Hans's stereotype of femininity as described by Hall (Hall, 1997(1)). After being asked about it, Hans confirmed that perhaps he had trouble imagining such a thing because of how media usually picture gender roles. Still, he did not retract his opinion.

Lars was explaining in a similar way not caring at all about genders and skin colours and that video games creators should have complete freedom regarding the design of their characters, as long as it fits the context of the game. For instance, he was arguing that in shooter games, because of the military theme, characters should be in good physical shape and therefore it was normal to not see an overweight woman in the Overwatch casting of character. That argument is contradicting itself in more than one way: first, that is actually a restriction to the creators' freedom; second, not all shooters have only soldiers as characters, Overwatch being a good example of that.

These arguments could easily be interpreted as being the interviewees wanting to protect parts of the gaming culture they appreciate and don't want to see change or disappear. It is legitimate to want to protect something liked and to not want to feel as if it is not acceptable to like it. There reaction is natural and in concordance with Nikunen's observations (Nikunen, 2013).

#### 6.4 Relationship to the characters

As explained in the previous chapter, numerous Overwatch players end up choosing a *main*, a character in which they will specialised and that they will play most of the time. Choosing a main in Overwatch is the equivalent of choosing an avatar: the players will cumulate a lot of play time with it, the character will be their way of interacting with other players, and players will come to identify to it to some extent.

At the beginning of this project, it was expected to discover that the interviewees had a main. In the process of finding a main, players first have to get familiar with the game mechanics and the different character abilities. At the stage of writing the interviews, my hypothesis was that at first, the interviewees would probably report trying out characters simply according to their looks, then trying their abilities, then deciding which abilities fit best their playstyle and choose a main consequently.

That hypothesis was contradicted by the interviewees telling which character they tried first, since most of the interviewees told that they made their choice purely based on gameplay. Instead of browsing randomly the characters' roster, they made an informed choice in how to start playing the game. Then, after getting used to the game mechanics and knowing the characters better, they chose themselves a main. Following this logic, it would be expected that players would share little with the chosen main character, as they all argued choosing to specialize in it solely because of the abilities. However, by comparing known characteristics of the players and their mains, a lot of similarities are found.

	Main	Main has same gender	Main has same skin color	Main is close culturally	Main is close in age (+/- 10 years-old)
<b>Adamu</b>	Changing character each competitive season	-	-	-	-
<b>Charles</b>	Junkrat	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Hans</b>	Roadhog	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Ingrid</b>	Mercy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Karim</b>	Pharah	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Lars</b>	Reinhardt	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Matti</b>	Flexing between five or six characters	-	-	-	-
<b>Wěi</b>	Mei	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 6.1 Similarities between the interviewees and their respective mains.

The sample for this research being limited, it is impossible to draw any conclusions from the above comparison. However, there is a possibility that the players identify easier to characters with which they already share characteristics and that it could influence their choice of main, even if they claim that their choice is solely based on abilities. Further research, using a more significant sample of players, would certainly be interesting.

### 6.5 “Not for me personally, but...”

When asked about their opinion regarding the potential effect of playing inclusive games on gamers, the interviewees’ first reaction was unanimously denial of any effect on themselves. Mostly, the participants were explaining that they were already accepting of different genders, ethnicities, cultures, sexual orientation, etc. and therefore a game would not make them more tolerant because there is no need for it.

On the other hand, when asked about potential effect on other players, most of the participants could imagine those effects a lot more easily. The imagine effects are interestingly comparable to the media effect theories presented in the second chapter.

The interviewees talked about how seeing more female characters could progressively make the players more used to it, and therefore eventually make them more used also to see female players, which is a hypothesis that matches with the cultivation theory (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2013, p. 160; Gerbner, et al., 1986). Others talked about how players would, through a game like Overwatch, get to know a bit more about other cultures they are not familiar with and perhaps become more understanding that way. Wěi gave as an example that hopefully, players who have never seen a lion dance before get interested by seeing one in Overwatch and try to learn more on Chinese traditions. This educative effect matches with Bandura's social cognitive theory in the sense that an individual who would want to make themselves more knowledgeable of other cultures could indeed do it partly through playing inclusive games (Bandura, 1977, pp. 9-10). Yet, those possibilities were only hypotheses imagined by the interviewees.

#### 6.5.1 Reported effects

Towards the end of the interview, the participants would often become more at ease and some of them opened up, telling personal experiences of actual effects they said having from playing video games like Overwatch. Charles mentioned that playing a game with characters coming from different countries working with each other made him question his own relation to people from other cultures; it made him start an introspection, wondering if he was open enough to differences. It made him want to meet different people. Ingrid talked about how, when she started playing, she didn't like Zarya at all because of her design, and how through playing the character she learned to love it. Finally, Adamu narrated how, through video games and other media, he came to be able to consider LGBT+ people as normal. His story is quoted in the previous chapter.

All these testimonies are media effects comparable with what Bandura described with his social cognitive theory. In all three, the interview witnessed a behaviour in media, here characters presenting important differences with each other having a positive relationship, which led them to wanting to imitate the behaviour. They created themselves – or are in the process of creating themselves – environmental conditions in order to change. The game itself can be part of that environment. According to Bandura's theory and those stories, it could mean that there is no change unless the change is desired by the individual (Bandura, 1977, pp. 9-10). Once again, it

must be reminded that the present sample is too small to reach conclusions. Further research on the topic could offer more on the topic.

## 6.6 Will to protect creative freedom

One of the points on which the interviewees were agreeing is that it was important to let the game developers create what they wanted. As Karim said, if it is respectful and doesn't harm anyone, artistic freedom should be respected.

### 6.6.1 Gamergate as an event

The awareness campaigns happening more and more in the last years have affected the video game industry. Especially following the Gamergate events, different waves of criticism have hit game culture and some specific works (Moosa, 2015; Sarkeesian, 2017). Also, with the current dominance of social left ideology (Mouffe, 2005), some people start feeling like it is becoming very difficult to create or like a media work, without it being criticized for lacking some form of representation.

That is what some interviewees are expressing when saying that the developers should not be afraid to create what they want. Although he was one of the interviewees acknowledging the most the importance of inclusiveness in video games, Matti also said that creators should not be over pressured to include all different sorts of representations. He doesn't think it would help. "It shouldn't be that you should do diversity because you would be seen as an unethical game developer if you didn't, but more like it's a good thing, it's a strength to acknowledge those other players. It's a good thing to do." Ingrid think that with the pressure they are under, developers might even be afraid of including characters with different identities by fear of making a mistake in the representation and having to endure a backlash. Their worries are legitimate and go in line with Nikunen's observation of enhance polarisation against the pressure for inclusiveness when it is too important (Nikunen, 2013).

Indeed, those awareness-raising campaigns can be seen as an *event*, as described by Stocchetti (2017, p. 41). They changed the meanings associated to some signs common to the video game industry. For example, they tried teaching to players how to detect sexism or racism in classic video game tropes (Sarkeesian, 2017). While some members of the communities did change their

point of view and tried to advocate for better representation of minorities in video games (Zecher, 2014), others didn't change their minds. Some even felt that their culture was attacked and, as a result, built themselves opinion completely opposed to the ones campaigned for. The following case observed in the interviews is an example of that.

#### 6.6.2 Creative freedom and sexualization

When the topic of sexualization came up during the interviews, the only character mentioned by the participants was always Widowmaker. As presented in the analysis, different participants had very different points of view on the matter. For Matti and Charles, the character is overly sexualised without reason. On the other hand, for Ingrid and Lars, the sexualization is not overly done.

Those differences of opinion are coming from the fact that the different participants interpret the same signs in the character's design in different ways. While for the first, the character's sleek clothing and cleavage is a sign of objectification of the female body, for Lars and Ingrid, it is a sign of sophistication that is strategically used to show the character's personality in her clothing. The latter interviewees are therefore rejecting the meaning introduced by the awareness-raising campaigns and try to protect the video game creators' rights to create not only, but also, sexualised characters. Because of different cultural experiences or belonging to different sub-cultures of gaming, the interviewees associated different meanings to the character's design elements (Rose, 2012, p. 30).

#### 6.6.3 Importance of the story

Another thing that the interviewees wanted to protect was the creators' freedom to tell the story they want. All interviewees told in some way how a good story was important for them in a game. Interestingly, this was also one of the reasons some of the participants were giving for saying that inclusivity was important in a game: because the characters' different identities would make for a better story.

On the other hand, it was also the reason given by interviewees to explain why a good representation of different identities should not be demanded to every single games, because it



would impede the creators trying to tell a story that is more personal or that takes place in a historical context.

#### 6.6.4 Importance of history

Through his interview, what Lars was the most categorical about was the importance of respecting plausibility and facts when making historical games. In the fourth chapter, Lars's main argument regarding that idea is presented. His reserves towards modifying historical facts in order to be more inclusive meet Malik's argument against creative diversity: both have the same opinion that presenting the discrimination that was or is present in the world is actually more educative and more productive than hiding it. Lars explains that there could be other ways for such games to be inclusive: for example, by actually researching historical characters from minorities and make them have a role; or by addressing the discrimination happening in the games' setting (Malik, 2013).

At the end of his interview, Lars gave another example in order to explain why representation of minority could be a hindrance to immersion in a world and fidelity to history. He talked about the *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt, 2015), telling how he didn't agree with the critics blaming the developers for the lack of representation of minorities in the game. His testimony is quoted at the end of the fourth chapter. However, what Lars said about the topic actually showed defensiveness towards those who would criticize the gaming culture: no matter how it is looked at, elves and monsters are not representative of minorities. Also, such an argument infers little openness towards creative historical games.

Lars's argument was analysed here because, although the sample used in the scope of this study was limited, it doesn't mean that it is absolutely not representative and Lars most likely shares his views with others in the gaming community, as are those of the other participants.

### 6.7 Conclusion

The sample of players who accepted to be interviewed for this research was, in the end, good in the scope of this short thesis. There limited number doesn't allow for hard conclusions regarding the media effect of inclusive games. However, the interviews offered a good idea of the stance Overwatch players have towards inclusiveness in video games. The material obtained was offering

different points of view and perspective of analysis to understand the players' reactions and thoughts to attempt at inclusiveness in Overwatch's design.

In conclusion, the participants' reflections and reaction to developers' attempt at inclusive design in Overwatch were found to be mostly positive: they were glad with the inclusiveness, and the representation of minorities offered in the character design. The only down points were addressed by some interviewees towards the inclusiveness of different body types and the sexualised design of a single character.

Regarding the potential effects on players, it was also interesting to observe the uniformity in the interviewees claiming, at first, how they are not affected in any ways by playing more or less inclusive games and then being often able to imagine how it could impact others. Still, all participants expressed a will to protect the game creators' ability to write stories and characters as they want, not wanting to hinder their creativity. The fact that all interviewees expressed worries that criticism might impede the designers' creativity is something that could be addressed in a future study, along with the observed polarisation of some participants who seemed to feel like their subculture was attacked by the criticism.

There were also very interesting testimonies offered by some of the interviewees about how inclusiveness in games affected them personally. As stated earlier, the sample offered by this study is too small to draw any conclusions from those observations. Yet, it hints towards potentially very interesting results if Bandura's social cognitive theory would be studied further using video games.

The methodology chosen in the scope of this study doesn't allow, unfortunately, hard conclusions or definite answers to the research question. Researchers wishing to observe further consequences of exposition to inclusiveness in games on their players would do well to look at media effect methodologies. Observing different groups of participants in their process of getting accustomed to the game would reveal their actual reactions to the different characters, for instance. Testing their reactions to people with different identities than them before and after playing the game a certain amount of time, as Burgess et al. (2011) describe, could give more concrete data to confirm what is hinted here: that if the game causes reflection and introspection, the players might actually decide to change their behaviours, and that perhaps the game itself can become a part of the environment they will create around themselves to cause that change.

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## ANNEXE

This annexe has been added in order to have a thesis able to stand as itself as a completed work, while allowing readers less familiar with the material studied to still follow and understand. It is meant as a reference document while talking about the characters. All the information comes from the Overwatch official website (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019), beside the characters' heights, that have been compiled on the Wikia of the game (Gamepedia, 2019).

All the information presented here is describing the game as it was as of December 2018, when the interviews were led. The additional description of the characters is coming from the background information given by Blizzard in the lore. All images were available on the Overwatch website, on their *Media* page (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019).

## I – Presentation of the Characters

### Ana



Figure 1 Screenshot of Ana in the map Route 66. The concept art was not available (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Support
Country of origin	Egypt
Gender	Female
Age	60
Height	1.82
Background	Military
Affiliation	Overwatch
Difficulty	3

Ana is a very interesting character in Overwatch as she has a lot of lore attached to her. She also presents characteristics that are very rare to see in a FPS hero or just any video game hero in general: she is a 60-year-old woman from North Africa with white hair and a head scarf. She is also loved by numerous players since, as a sniper, she has a rather unique gameplay for a support character, and also because she is really presented as the ‘grandmother’ of Overwatch. Along with a white hair and her lack of mobility abilities, she has voice lines such as “Children, behave” and

“Mother knows best” or “Take your medicine”, setting the character as the stereotype of the benevolent grandma.

Ashe



Figure II Screenshot of Ashe in the map Route 66. The concept art was not available (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	United States of America
Gender	Female
Age	39
Height	1.71
Background	Criminal
Affiliation	Criminal organization
Difficulty	2

Raised in a rich family, but receiving little to no attention from anyone else than her butler, which is behind her in the picture, Ashe went from being a rebellious teenager to the leader of a criminal organization. Ashe is a stereotype of a female villain: big colour contrasts in the makeup, smug attitude, and prompt to give orders. She is also the female counterpart of McCree in her cowgirl/desperado design.

## Bastion



Figure III Concept art of Bastion (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure IV Screenshot of Bastion and Hanzo in the map King's Row (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	Unclear (somewhere in Europe, possibly France or Germany)

Gender	None
Age	30
Height	2.2
Background	Military
Affiliation	Overwatch
Difficulty	1

Bastion is literally a war machine. In its alternative tank configuration, it can deal immense damages to the enemy team. Although it could be classified as an Omnic, its level of intelligence is unclear. Its voicelines are only some *beep* and *boop* sounds that the player is free to interpret. It fills the trope of the powerful simpleton: very direct, easy to understand playstyle, but with a lack of mobility making its players very dependable on their teammates. It appears sympathetic, however, through the friendship it built with its friend the bird, Ganimede.

## Brigitte



Figure V Concept art of Brigitte (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)





Figure VI Screenshot of Brigitte in the map Watchpoint: Gibraltar (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Support
Country of origin	Sweden
Gender	Female
Age	23
Height	1.78
Background	Adventurer
Affiliation	Overwatch
Difficulty	1

Brigitte is a faithful, enthusiastic young adventurer eager to prove herself. She is squire to her godfather, Reinhardt, and accompanies him in his quests. Like him, she has a style of armor, shield and weapon with a medieval style. Her playstyle is quite straightforward, easy to pick up, which makes her a good pick for beginners eager, like her, to prove themselves. She is Torbjörn's daughter.

## Doomfist



Figure VII Concept art of Doomfist (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure VIII Screenshot of Doomfist in the map Temple of Anubis (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	Nigeria

Gender	Male
Age	45
Height	2.18
Background	Criminal
Affiliation	Talon
Difficulty	3

Doomfist is the leader of the organisation opposing Overwatch, Talon. He believes that evolution can only take place in conflict and is trying to provoke it. He presents the stereotype of the Black male in video games: aggressive, athletic, less sophisticated fighting style (he is using brawling instead of a gun), and sexualised design with his prominent muscles. His gameplay is also very aggressive. However, he is little discussed in this study because no interviewees talked much about him. Only Adamu told that he really liked his design and his accent.

## D.Va



Figure IX Concept art of D.Va (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)





Figure X Screenshot of D.Va ejecting out of her mecha (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Tank
Country of origin	South Korea
Gender	Female
Age	19
Height	1.66
Background	Esports
Affiliation	National defense
Difficulty	2

Ex-esport champion and celebrity, D.Va is a gamer and an idol: she is young, has fans, merchandise with her logo, is featured in movies, and talks like a gamer. She has voice lines like “I play to win!” and “Is this easy mode?” showing her as cheeky, and her logo is a pink bunny.

## Genji



Figure XI Concept art of Genji (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure XII Screenshot of Genji (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	Japan
Gender	Male

Age	35
Height	1.7
Background	Criminal
Affiliation	Overwatch
Difficulty	3

Genji is without doubt the stereotype of the Japanese ninja. His gameplay is fast, requiring good reflexes and his weapons are shurikens and a long and short Japanese swords. He is also a sort of cyborg since, after a fight with his brother Hanzo left him almost dead, he was kept alive by turning him into a half-omnic. Genji had difficulties to put up with his new identity after the incident, but came to be in peace with it at the contact of Zenyatta, who helped him reach a new level of consciousness and wisdom.

### Hanzo



Figure XIII Concept art of Hanzo (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure XIV Screenshot of Hanzo in the map Hanamura (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	Japan
Gender	Male
Age	38
Height	1.73
Background	Criminal
Affiliation	None
Difficulty	3

Hanzo is Genji's older brother and his counterpart as he represents the stereotype of the samurai. His clothing inspired from a traditional Japanese dress and his voicelines speaking of honor support the concept. He acts calmed and poised, which fits with his gameplay that requires good aiming.



## Junkrat



Figure XV Concept art of Junkrat (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure XVI Screenshot of Junkrat and Roadhog in the map Temple of Anubis (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
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Country of origin	Australia
Gender	Male
Age	25
Height	1.95
Background	Criminal
Affiliation	None
Difficulty	2

Junkrat is crafty, explosive-obsessed, and a bit crazy. His gameplay is about area-denying and includes launching grenades that will bounce around patterns difficult to predict, matching with his personality. His role in the lore, however, is partly which of a comic relief, since he can be seen hurting himself in some of his highlight intros and his visual design also lets the player understand that he exploded himself more than once.

## Lucio



*Figure XVII Concept art of Lucio (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)*



Figure XVIII Screenshot of Lucio and Mercy in the map Numbani (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Support
Country of origin	Brazil
Gender	Male
Age	26
Height	1.6
Background	Musician
Affiliation	None
Difficulty	2

Lucio is an internationally known DJ who decided to help the people from Rio's favelas to keep their freedom. He is also a trope of South Americans, as he is outgoing, enthusiastic, loves soccer, dances well... the list could go on.



## McCree



Figure XIX Concept art of McCree (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure XX Screenshot of McCree and Zenyatta in the map Temple of Anubis (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Class	Damage
Country of origin	United States of America
Gender	Male
Age	37
Height	1.85
Background	Mercenary
Affiliation	Overwatch
Difficulty	2

Although Overwatch takes place in the future, McCree seems to be coming straight out of the far-west. He is the stereotype of the tough cowboy from old westerns: his clothing, his accent, his voice lines, and his background as an ex-criminal who became a bounty hunter.

## Mei



*Figure XXI Concept art of Mei (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)*



Figure XXII Screenshot of Mei and Zarya in the map Watchpoint: Gibraltar (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	China
Gender	Female
Age	Physical: 31. Real: 40
Height	1.6
Background	Scientist
Affiliation	Overwatch
Difficulty	3

Mei is an climatologist who got frozen in the ice for almost 10 years and is now back, helping Overwatch. She is always hopeful and enthusiastically talking about gathering data.

## Mercy



Figure XXIII Concept art of Mercy (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure XXIV Screenshot of Mercy in the map Hanamura (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Support
Country of origin	Switzerland

Gender	Female
Age	37
Height	1.7
Background	Scientist
Affiliation	Overwatch
Difficulty	1

Mercy is the trope of a merciful angel saving her allies from the claws of death. Her visual design, with the classic skin being mostly white, her bright angel wings, and her halo already show it. Still, her gameplay does too: she can fly to an ally's side to heal or resurrect them.

## Moirá



*Figure XXV Concept art of Moira (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)*





Figure XXVI Screenshot of Moira (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Support
Country of origin	Ireland
Gender	Female
Age	48
Height	1.95
Background	Scientist
Affiliation	Talon
Difficulty	2

Moira is the trope of the evil scientist who stops before nothing for her experiments, especially not ethics. Her gameplay also translate those characteristics, allowing her to suck out the health of enemies in order to heal more her allies and herself.

## Orisa



Figure XXVII Concept art of Orisa (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure XXVIII Screenshot of Orisa in the map Numbani (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Tank
Country of origin	Nigeria
Gender	Female
Age	1 month

Height	2.23
Background	Military
Affiliation	National Defense
Difficulty	2

Orisa is the youngest character of Overwatch, as she was freshly built by her creator Efi. However, her personality shows her as a motherly figure. As shield tank, her role is to protect her teammates and her voicelines like “Your security is my primary concern” or “Do you need a hug?” certainly show her in that light.

### Pharah



*Figure XXIX Concept art of Pharah (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)*



Figure XXX Screenshot of Pharah in the map King's Row (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	Egypt
Gender	Female
Age	32
Height	1.8
Background	Military
Affiliation	National Defense
Difficulty	1

Pharah is a soldier, a leader. She is disciplined and proud. Her armor gives her large shoulders, making her look strong and her animations include military stances. She is Ana's daughter and has been inspired by her to serve in the military to protect the innocent.



## Reaper



Figure XXXI Concept art of Reaper (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure XXXII Screenshot of Reaper in the map Temple of Anubis (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	United States of America

Gender	Male
Age	58
Height	1.85
Background	Military
Affiliation	Talon
Difficulty	1

Ancient member of Overwatch with a mysterious backstory, Reaper now works for Talon. The character represents literally the trope of Death. He has a mask lookin like a skull, an old-looking black cape, abilities making him look and move like a specter, a ghastly voice, vampiristic abilities, and is certainly a synonym for death for some other characters.

### Reinhardt



*Figure XXXIII Concept art of Reinhardt (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)*



Figure XXXIV Screenshot of Reinhardt in the map King's Row (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Tank
Country of origin	Germany
Gender	Male
Age	61
Height	2.23
Background	Military
Affiliation	Overwatch
Difficulty	1

Reinhardt is the trope of the noble hero from epic tales. He is massive in his medieval-style armor and has a loud voice with which he speaks of honor and glory. He is noble in his way of protecting his allies with his huge shield, and yet rash when charging in the enemy with his hammer.



## Roadhog



Figure XXXV Roadhog's concept art (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure XXXVI Screenshot of Roadhog in the map Temple of Anubis (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Tank
Country of origin	Australia

Gender	Male
Age	48
Height	2.2
Background	Criminal
Affiliation	None
Difficulty	1

Roadhog is Junkrat's acolyte and is the trope of a slaughterer. Fat as a pig, his masks also resembles a pig's head and is reminding of some horror movies' killer's mask. His way of fighting is deadly and barbaric, with a scrap gun and a hook. However, he also has a humouristic aspect to him: he carries around a turnip plush toy named Pachimari.

#### Soldier:76



Figure XXXVII Concept art of Soldier:76 (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure XXXVIII Screenshot of Soldier:76 in the map Watchpoint: Gibraltar (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	United States of America
Gender	Male
Age	55
Height	1.85
Background	Military
Affiliation	Overwatch
Difficulty	1

Soldier:76 is the archetype of the american marine. Average height, large of shoulders, practical vest, army boots, huge semi-automatic gun: he is the stereotypical character found in traditional First Person Shooter games like Call of Duty (Activision, 2003-). He is also the gateway character for players used to those games to adapt to Overwatch. Dutiful and born leader, he is the perfect soldier. However, Overwatch recently added a quirk to the character, revealing that he is actually homosexual. The revelation was done in January 2019, after the interviews, so the topic won't be discussed.

## Sombra



Figure XXXIX Concept art of Sombra (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure XL Screenshot of Sombra (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	Mexico
Gender	Female

Age	30
Height	1.62
Background	Hacker
Affiliation	Talon
Difficulty	3

Sombra is a cunning hacker: she is smart, quick, punk, and has smug voicelines like “Just squishing a bug” or “Where is the fun in playing fair?” Her gameplay also reflects her hacker quality by allowing her to become invisible, teleport, and incapacitate opponents.

### Symmetra



Figure XLI Concept art of Symmetra (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)





Figure XLII Screenshot of Symmetra (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	India
Gender	Female
Age	28
Height	1.7
Background	Architect
Affiliation	Private company
Difficulty	2

Symmetra wants to create a better world, which is, according to her, ordered. She has a minimalistic outfit, glasses and voicelines matching that character concept like “Everything by design” and “Perfect harmony”.

## Torbjörn



Figure XLIII Concept art of Torbjörn (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure XLIV Screenshot of Torbjörn in the map Hanamura (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	Sweden
Gender	Male
Age	57
Height	1.4

Background	Engineer
Affiliation	Overwatch
Difficulty	2

Torbjörn represent the trope of the (almost Tolkenian) dwarf: short, long beard, hammer, and crafty. He builds turrets on the battlefield, which also fits with the stereotype of great builders often associated to Dwarf in fantasy stories. He also shows a great attachment to his creations, calling them sometimes his babies. He is also Brigitte's father.

### Tracer



Figure XLV Concept art of Tracer (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure XLVI Screenshot of Tracer in the map Temple of Anubis (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	United Kingdom
Gender	Female
Age	26
Height	1.62
Background	Military
Affiliation	Overwatch
Difficulty	2

Tracer is the trope of the pixie girl: she is small-framed with short hair, cheerful, friendly and funny. Her gameplay is very quick paced as she can project herself in the future in order to go fast, pass the enemy lines and attack directly her target. Tracer is also the face of Overwatch, the character who was on most of the posters and all the game covers at the release. It was also revealed in December 2016 that she has a girlfriend at home, making her Overwatch's first known LGBT character.



## WidowMaker



Figure XLVII Concept art of Widowmaker (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure XLVIII Screenshot of Widowmaker (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Damage
Country of origin	France

Gender	Female
Age	33
Height	1.75
Background	Dancer
Affiliation	Talon
Difficulty	2

Widowmaker is by far the most sexualized character in Overwatch, which represent her character of ‘femme fatale’. She has every traditional stereotypical attribute of the irresistible woman: long luscious hair, hourglass-shaped body, arched back, long legs, full lips, heels and a deep cleavage. However, she is the kind of untouchable, cold woman who’s physical appearance is also a trap. Her code name is a reference to her background, since she made herself a widow, and to the black widow spider. She has voice lines like “I will draw them into my web” and “The widow weaves her web”. Interestingly, she is the most sexualized character and the one with the clothing showing the most her body, but also the character that is the less visible to other players since she is always hiding in the shadows, waiting to take the perfect shot.

## Winston



Figure XLIX Concept art of Winston (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure L Screenshot of Winston in the map Temple of Anubis (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Tank
Country of origin	None (Moon Colony)
Gender	Male
Age	29
Height	2.2
Background	Scientist
Affiliation	Overwatch
Difficulty	2

Winston is the trope of the classic Dr.Jekyll and Mr.Hide, or, for a more recent reference, Hulk. Normally, he is very agreeable, a bit clumsy, and a smart scientist. However, when he get angry, he suddenly becomes a lot stronger and a lot less controllable. In the game, that is his ultimate ability.

## Wrecking Ball (Hammond)



Figure LI Concept art of Wrecking Ball (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure LII Screenshot of Wrecking Ball, Lucio and Soldier in the map Route 66 (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Tank
Country of origin	None (Moon Colony)
Gender	Male
Age	14
Height	Difficult to say. Quite short. Maybe 30 cm.
Background	Mech fights



Affiliation	None
Difficulty	3

The hero here is not the wrecking ball itself, it is actually the hamster, Hammond, who built the mecha and drives it. On the moon colony, Hammond was genetically enhanced to be super smart. Thirsty for adventure, he managed to flee the facility where he was raised to Earth. Wrecking Ball is the most surprising addition to Overwatch. Even though he is a tank, he is the character with the best mobility when he rolls and balances around in Wrecking Ball configuration. A good Wrecking Ball player can create chaos in the opposing team by pushing them around, shooting down on of their members, fleeing and repeating. The little hamster can't talk himself, but his Wrecking Ball "translates" his squeaking.

### Zarya



Figure LIII Concept art of Zarya (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure LIV Screenshot of Zarya and Tracer in the map King's Row (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Tank
Country of origin	Russia
Gender	Female
Age	28
Height	1.95
Background	Athlete
Affiliation	National Defense
Difficulty	3

Zarya is the archetype of the strong Russian woman. As an ex-body builder, she is massive and doesn't hesitate to show her muscles in her different emotes. However, with her enormous cannon, her practical suit, her short hair, her scar and her tattoo, she also fills the stereotype of the woman with a lot of masculine traits, something that makes her difficult to like to some players who don't appreciate to see traditionally male characteristics on a female character. Despite that, Zarya fills also the stereotype of the proud, patriotic Russian, with voice lines such as "For the motherland!" and "I can bench more than you!"

## Zenyatta



Figure LV Concept art of Zenyatta (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)



Figure LVI Screenshot of Zenyatta in the map Temple of Anubis (Blizzard Entertainment Inc., 2019)

Class	Support
Country of origin	Nepal
Gender	Male
Age	20
Height	1.72

Background	Monk
Affiliation	None
Difficulty	3

Zenyatta is the stereotype of the wise monk. He is small framed, not dangerous-looking, seems to be permanently sitting in a meditative stance. He always keeps calm speaks with a posed voice and has voicelines offering his wisdom to the other characters such as “Free your mind” and “Life is more than a series of ones and zeroes.” Zenyatta is also an Omnic, which causes some of the characters to be wary of him.

## II – Chapter 3's figures

Figure 3.1 Characters' classes

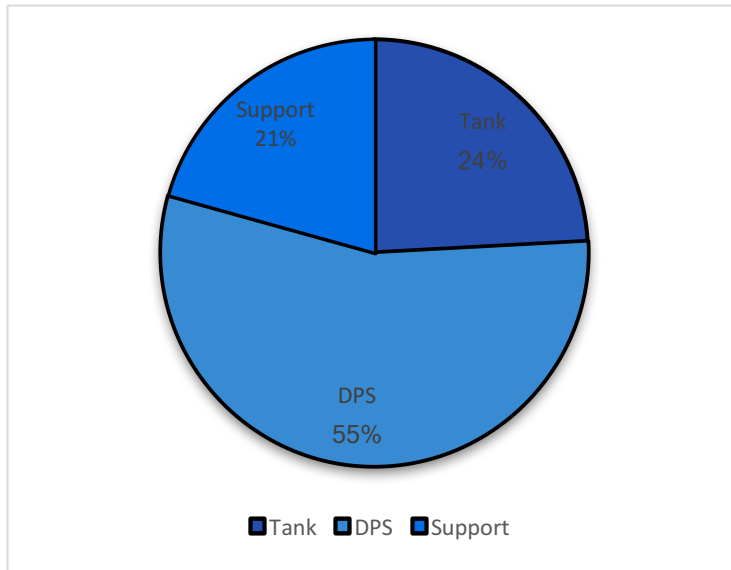


Figure 3.2 Playing difficulty of the characters

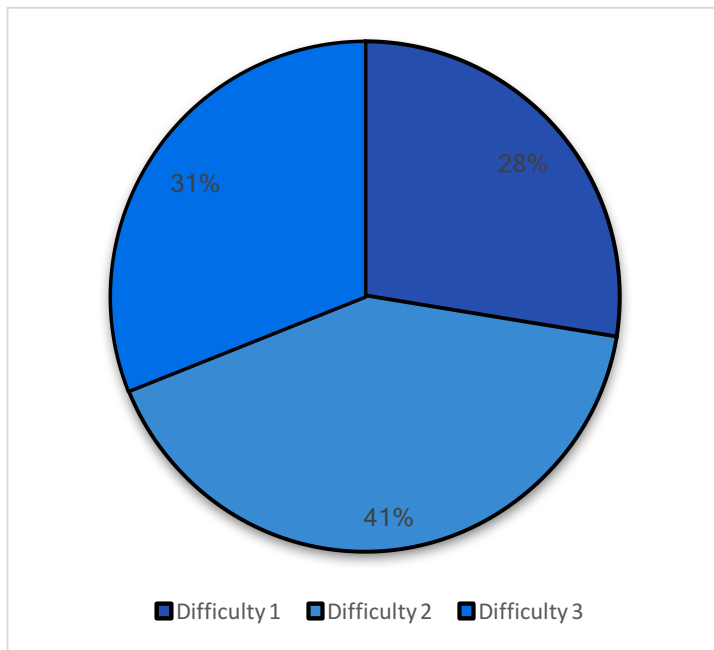


Figure 3.3 The characters' allegiance

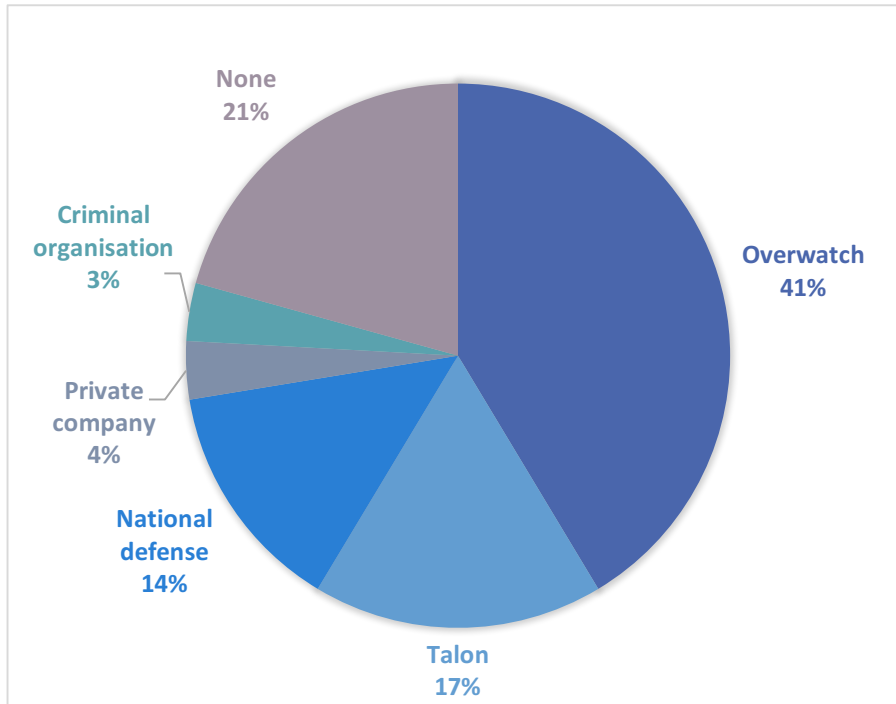


Figure 3.4 The character's professional background

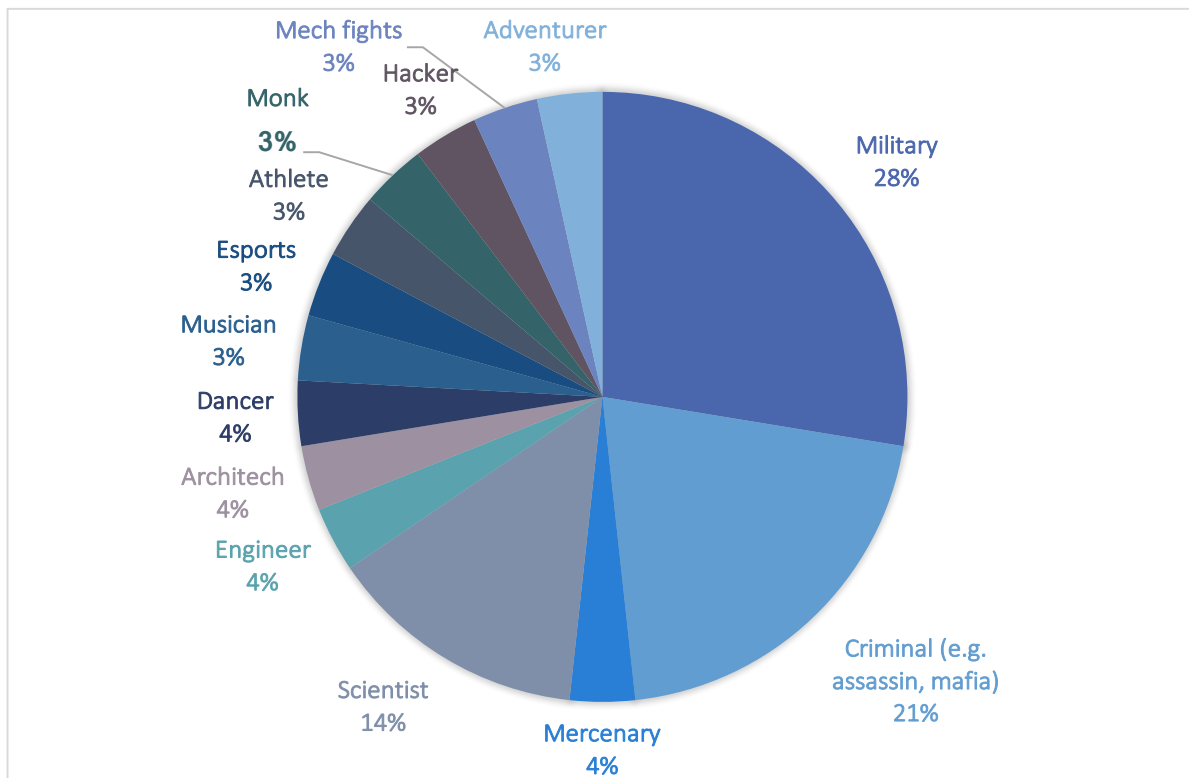


Figure 3.5 The character's region of origin

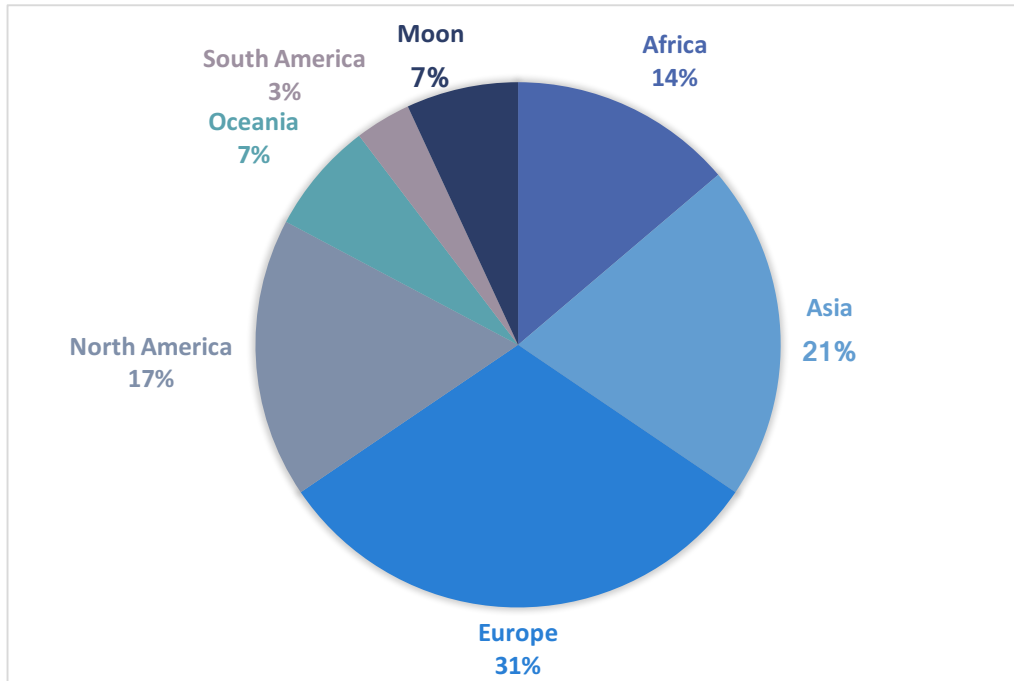


Figure 3.6 The character's country of origin

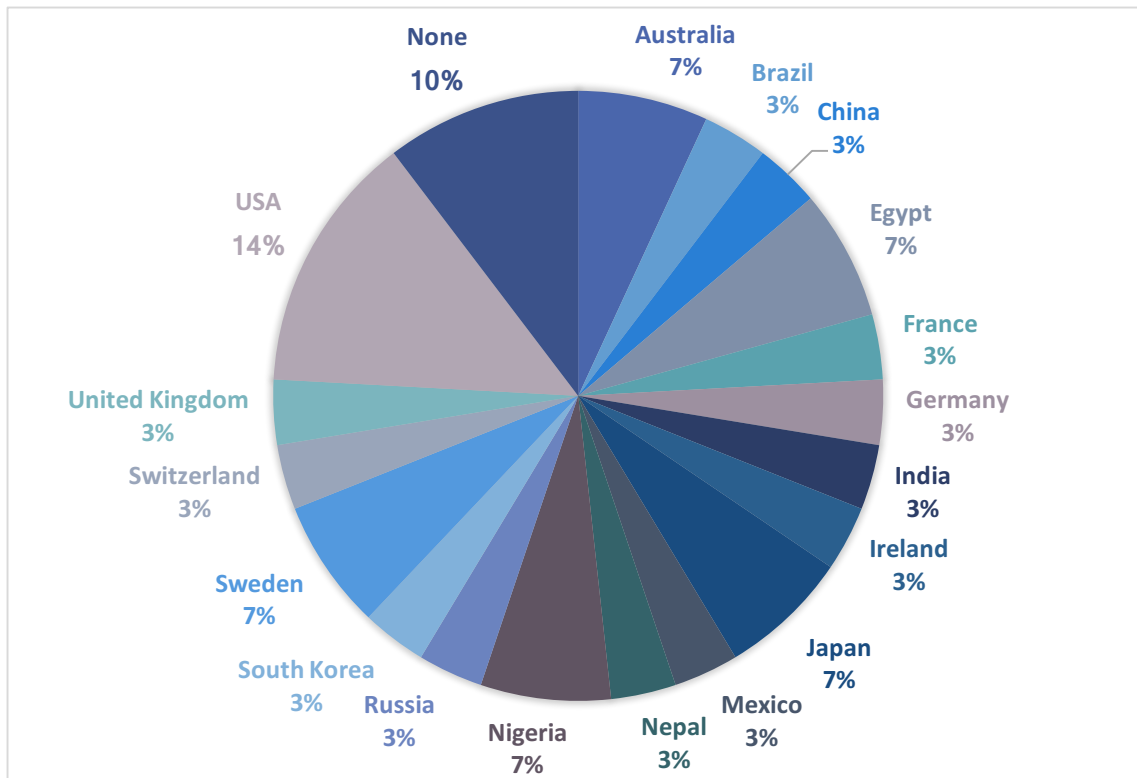




Figure 3.7 The character's gender

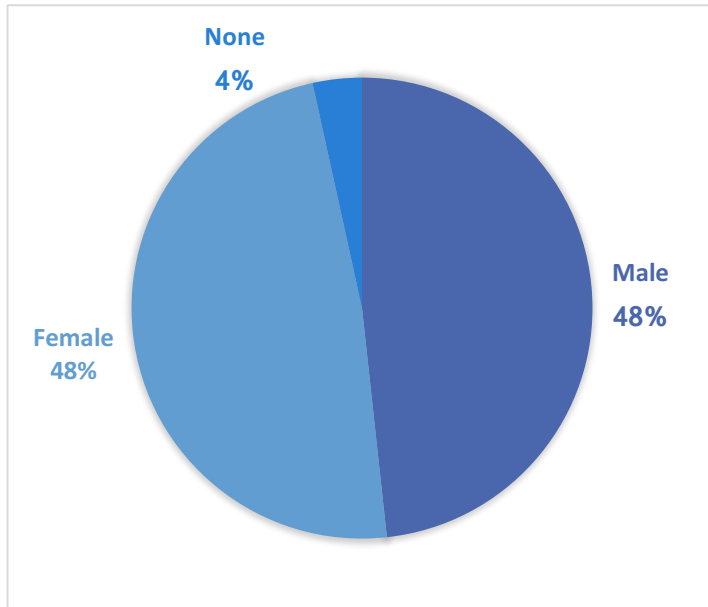


Figure 3.8 The character's age groups

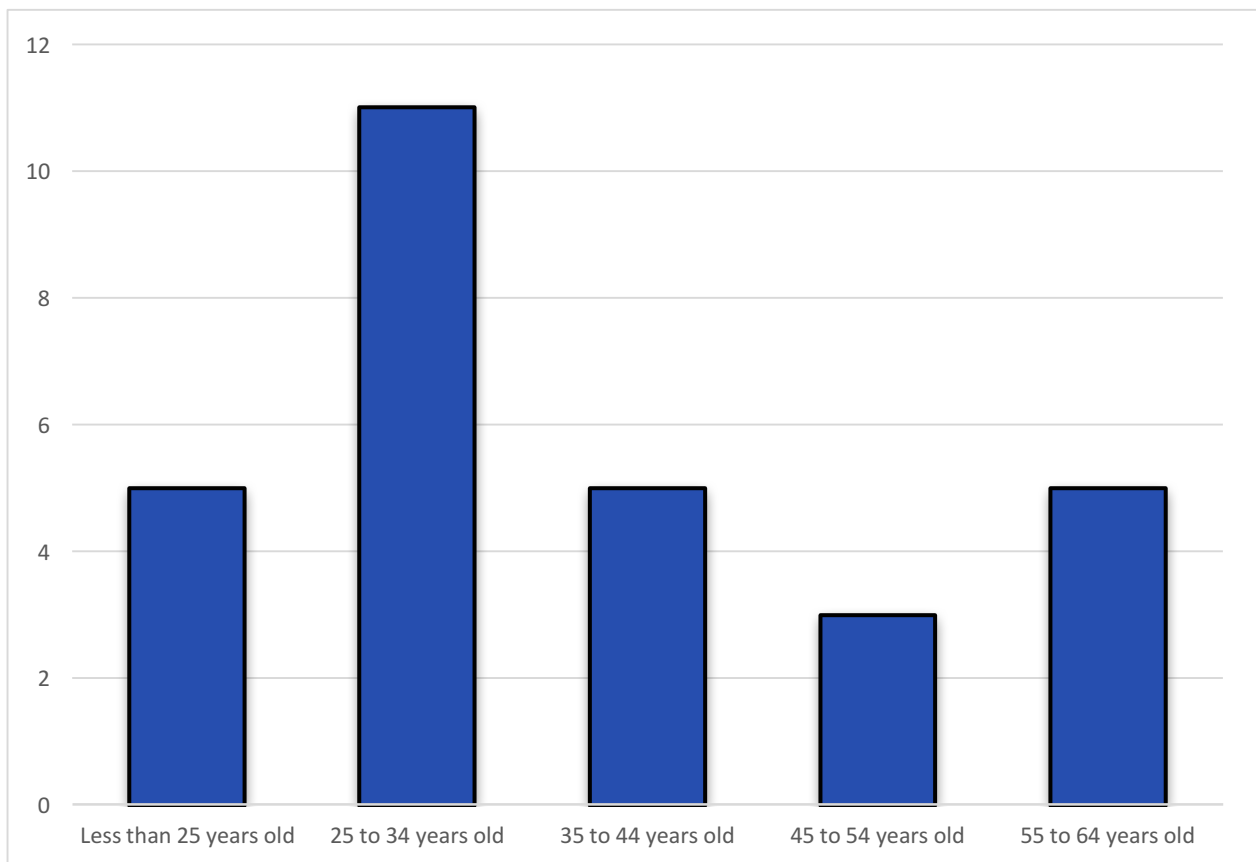


Figure 3.9 The character's species

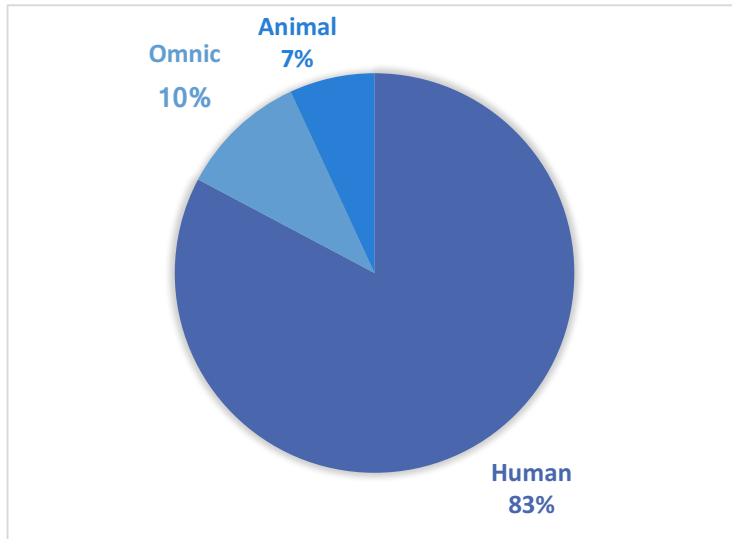


Figure 3.10 The characters' skin colour

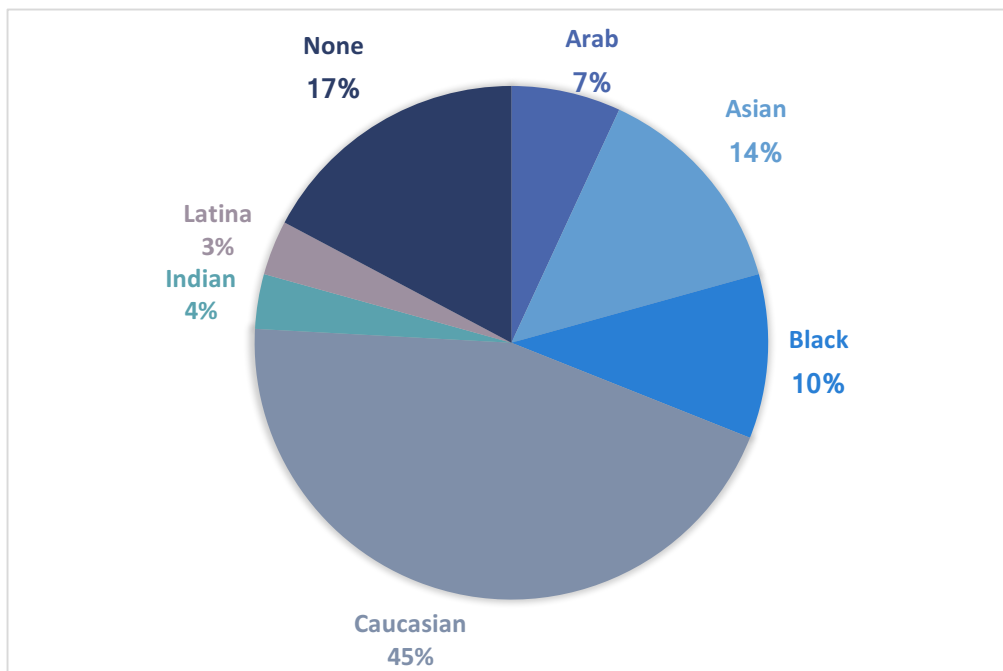


Figure 3.11 The Characters' skin colour by gender

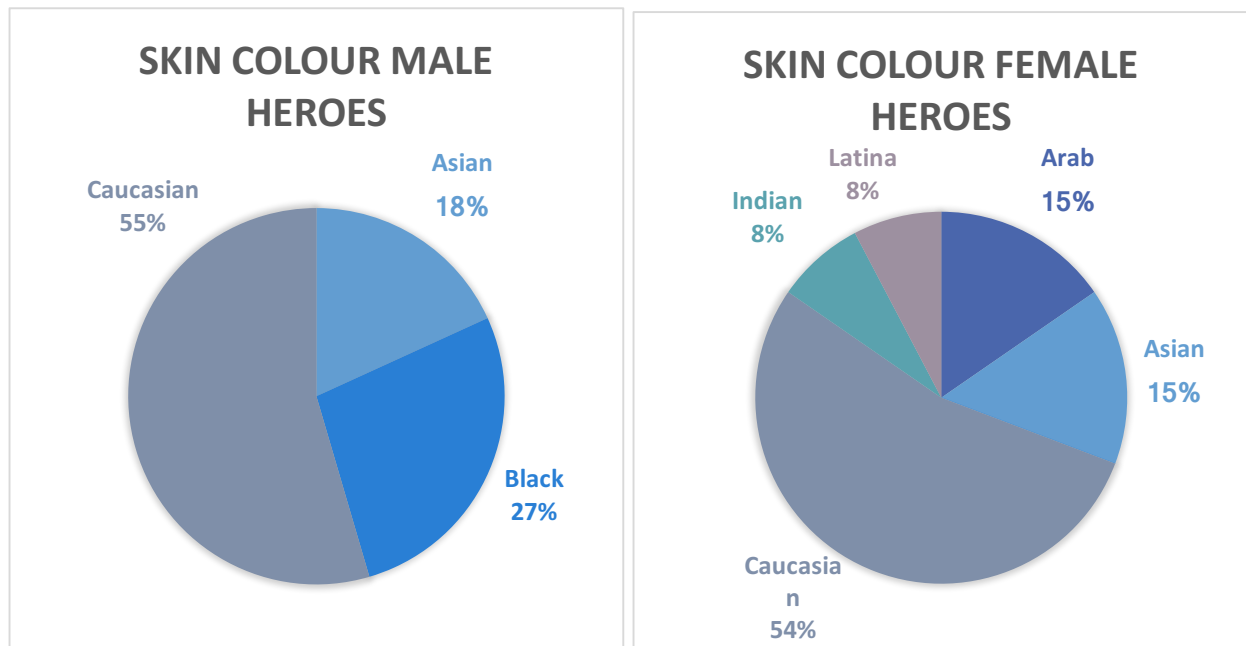


Figure 3.13 The maps' regions

